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THE
STUDENT'S WIFE.

A Novel.

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE STUDENT'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE important Monday at length arrived; and Philip, who was ready at least two hours before it was possible to start, tormented Caroline unceasingly to begin dressing, and sent her to her room, at last, fairly exhausted and out of spirits.

It was one of those early autumn days, when the soft wind begins to freshen agreeably, the trees to rustle with a pleasant, musical sound, and everything in nature to wear a more brisk and animated aspect than it can do during the languid and oppressive heat of summer.

Caroline Ashton had always loved the autumn. In her mind, it was associated

with longer afternoon rambles by the banks of the cool Serpentine, or amidst the green, quiet shades of Kensington Gardens—with dreamy twilights, spent in companionship with one or two chosen friends, by the large bay window of the old school-room, or wandering about the lime avenue in the pleasant, high-walled garden of Fairfield House.

The quiet routine of school discipline, the approbation of her teachers, the warm friendship of nearly all her young companions, had been sufficient, at that time, to fill her heart, and make her life flow in a tranquil, happy stream.

But, in the moving panorama of her existence, those days had passed for ever, and given place to new scenes, new duties, new interests. Caroline had come to Elderton with the determination of leading a rational, and, as far as she could, a useful life. She had begun at once by banishing unavailing regrets for the pleasant time gone by, and for the friends from whom she was, probably, for ever separated.

She had encouraged the warm interest Theresa Berrington's appearance had first excited, and, at length, succeeded perfectly in attaching herself to this young, frank, innocent-minded, and most intelligent girl. Theresa's hopes and Theresa's fears became the new excitements of Caroline Ashton's peaceful life; and the one great object, which her energies always required, was found in the design of bringing about a match between her little love-sick friend and Lawrence Singleton.

So far all was well, and everything went on smoothly—Mrs. Forrest neither assisting, nor retarding the progress of events, but adorning, in her calm gentleness, the home where Caroline was learning to be so tranquilly happy again.

But another actor had suddenly appeared upon the scene, and, heedless of ordinary and established rules, had thrust himself and his troubles, at once, into the astonished hearts that intended to have been very cautious and wary in receiving him there at

all. Mrs. Forrest yielded without a struggle to the mysterious fascination of her wayward nephew; and, "poor Emily's" child was fast becoming as dear and precious to the lonely widow as "poor Emily" herself had been.

But, what was all this to Caroline Ashton? No ties of kindred bound her to Philip Maranham! No early associations were connected with him! He was a stranger—a perfect stranger to her, till the evening he rushed so unceremoniously into her presence, and enclosed her in his daring embrace.

He had now been little more than a week an inmate of the same dwelling, and yet, this proud, reserved, and quiet girl had become the recipient of all his secrets, had voluntarily consented to listen to his troubles, to sympathise with his disappointments, to counsel and advise him as she would a dear, wilful brother. He had tried her patience severely on the day in question; for, on reaching her own room,

she locked the door, opened the little window looking upon the green lane, and, sitting down beside it, indulged in that doubtful luxury usually denominated “a good, hearty cry.”

Yet Caroline was by no means a weeping heroine, and her tears, on the present occasion, were less the result of any actual grief than of overwrought nerves, and a kind of sorrowful recurrence to the peaceful days of her school life, which had been excited by some accidental train of thought connected with the pure autumn breeze that blew upon her flushed cheek, and brought with it the perfume of the sweet lime blossoms from the neighbouring road.

But tears, regrets, and all reminiscences of the past were soon over, and Caroline Ashton, attired with more than even her usual taste and care, entered the parlour, where Philip was most impatiently expecting her.

“At last!” he exclaimed, pettishly, snatching up the hat and gloves that were

lying ready on the table. "I wonder what favoured individual Miss Ashton intends captivating to-day!"

"Shall we say good bye to Mrs. Forrest now?" observed Caroline, without appearing to heed his rudeness. "I think I see her in the garden."

Philip would scarcely wait even for this; and, when they were fairly in the lane, he insisted on walking so fast, that his weaker companion was literally out of breath long before they arrived at the rectory. But she did not complain; and he, therefore, knew nothing about it, being entirely absorbed in his own reflections, the nature of which may be guessed from the following observation—the first, too, that he had made since they started—

"You said, I believe, that you had only seen one of Dr. Berrington's pupils, and that he was a weak-headed puppy, or something of that sort. You have, probably, heard Theresa mention the other frequently. Pray, what are his distinguishing qualities?"

“I must first correct the portrait you say I drew of Mr. Cressingham,” replied Caroline, struggling for breath. “He is not empty-headed by any means, although personal vanity appears, in his case, to choke much talent, as well as much good sense and amiability.”

“Spoken like a young lady finished at Fairfield House,” said Philip, snarlingly. “But what of the other fellow, if I may be permitted to inquire?”

“The other fellow, as you elegantly call him,” answered Caroline, with still unruffled temper, “is, from what I hear, a devotee to learning, a bookworm, a genius, —who lives more in dreams than in our dull world of actualities. But here we are, so you will be able to judge of everybody for yourself.”

Dr. and Mrs. Berrington were alone in the drawing-room when their guests were announced. They received them with their usual cordiality, and Mrs. Berrington told Caroline that Theresa would join

her immediately—that she was merely waiting for her cousin, a lady who had arrived unexpectedly the previous day, on a visit of some weeks.

“She’s a widow,” said the rector, rubbing his hands, as though there was something jocular in the very name; “and a merry one, too,” he continued, by way of explanation. “The very person to stir up poor, little Tessie, who has had more the aspect of a broken lily than of a fresh rosebud of late.”

Philip grew very attentive now.

“Yes,” added Mrs. Berrington, with a motherly sigh; “there is, indeed, a striking contrast between Isabel and Theresa at present; but I hope our dear girl will soon recover her bloom. I have great faith in horse exercise, and her pony is such a quiet, gentle creature; you must see it by and bye, Miss Ashton.”

Caroline replied that she wished much to do so, and at that moment the door opened and admitted Theresa and her

widowed cousin, who was introduced to the visitors as Mrs. Darlington.

Theresa was dressed in white, and looked more like the Madonna that hung in the dining-room than ever. Mrs. Darlington was dressed in black, and looked precisely what she was—a handsome, fashionable, lively widow, of eight or nine and twenty.

In a short time the pupils made their appearance, were introduced to those they did not already know, and then chose their respective positions amongst the party—Arthur Cressingham leaning over Mrs. Darlington's chair, and Lawrence Singleton taking one beside the rector.

The summons to dinner caused a rapid movement in the room. Mrs. Berrington said she would lead the way with her husband, and leave the young people to follow in what order they liked. The widow and Arthur Cressingham paired off quietly enough, and Caroline, who had been talking to Theresa, was going across the apartment to usurp Mr. Maranham's arm,

that the former might be left to Lawrence; when Philip, guessing her intention, rushed round the other side of the centre table, upset two footstools and a fire-screen, and endangered a stand of flowers, in order to secure Theresa for himself, which design he happily accomplished, and marched triumphantly forward, unconscious or heedless of the general amusement his impetuosity had excited.

Lawrence Singleton now made his way to Caroline, and they thus became companions at the dinner table.

It would be a very formidable thing for a matron of the present day to attempt a dinner party at three o'clock in the afternoon; the very thought of such an act of daring, is sufficient to bring on a nervous attack of an aggravated description. The act itself would be regarded as an indication of approaching insanity, and, no doubt, expose the unhappy perpetrator of it to the most vigilant watchfulness on the part of her anxious friends.

But thirty years ago, it was quite another matter; and Mrs. Berrington prepared to entertain her guests and family circle without the slightest apprehension that the absence of wax lights would interfere with the merriment and sociability of the party. It is true she had an invaluable auxiliary in the person of her accomplished niece; but, even had Mrs. Darlington not been present, I believe the amiable rectoress would have contrived to get very creditably over her three o'clock banquet, in defiance of the broad daylight and the possibility of "awful pauses."

As it was, everything went off delightfully: neither fish nor fowl were underdone, and the rector's Madeira and pale sherry were pronounced perfect. The widow was, undoubtedly, the life of the party. She had travelled a good deal since her husband's death, and had abundance of anecdotes, which might all have been prefaced with the comprehensive news-

paper words—"strange, if true!" Many of them (the rector whispered to Caroline) were made on the spur of the moment, or so garnished by the widow's fertile imagination, that very little of the plain fact could be discerned. He presumed, especially, to question one regarding an enthusiastic lecturer, whom Mrs. Darlington described as having, in her own presence, under the excitement of some popular subject, torn off large handfuls of his hair and thrown them amongst his audience.

"What do you think of that lady?" said Caroline in a low voice to Lawrence Singleton, when the conversation was loud and animated at the father end of the table.

"She is quite a new study for me," he replied, in the same subdued tone; "her conversation is certainly amusing."

So Arthur Cressingham seemed to think; for he spoke to no one else, and neglected even his dinner to flirt and

talk nonsense with his clever, fascinating neighbour. Caroline and Lawrence indulged, too, in a little quiet chat, and gave every indication of being pleased with each other.

Theresa was, perhaps, the only person who did not enjoy herself; but her spirits, which had been terribly depressed at first, rallied after a while, and whenever she saw Mr. Singleton observing her, she made a point of laughing and whispering with Philip, who, not understanding this by-play, became convinced that the angel was furling her wings at last, and growing into a woman, susceptible of human feelings.

About four o'clock, Mrs. Berrington led the way from the dining-room, telling the gentlemen they might follow in a quarter of an hour, and attend the ladies to the orchard.

"And how are we expected to amuse ourselves, now, aunt?" said Mrs. Darlington, throwing up every window as they

passed, and complaining that she could not breathe.

“I think, my dear, that you had better rest your tongue,” was the quiet reply; “and, perhaps, Miss Ashton will give us a little music.”

Caroline immediately complied with this request—Theresa standing near her to turn over the leaves; during the performance of which duty the following whispered dialogue took place—

“You did not find Philip Maranham so insupportable to-day, Theresa?”

“I saw no difference in him.”

“Yet you flirted desperately.”

“I could not remain silent.”

“Why not?”

“Because everybody else talked to their neighbour and appeared so well amused.”

“Do you think I was amused with mine?”

“It looked very like it; but I am quite glad that it was so. I knew you would suit each other.”

“Indeed! that was very clever of you, Theresa. Shall I tell you my opinion of him?”

“If you please.”

“Well, another time I will. Who is that just gone by the window?”

“I was not looking. I did not see.”

“Then your ear must have heard. Will he come in?”

“No; he will, probably, remain there, listening to your playing. Caroline, I feel sick, with the heat. I will ask Isabel to turn over the leaves for you, and sit down for a little while.”

When Miss Ashton left the piano, about five minutes later, she found that all the gentlemen, with the exception of Lawrence Singleton, were in the room; and that Philip was standing close to Theresa's chair, and looking the personification of radiant delight.

“Now then,” said Mrs. Berrington, “it is time for those who desire to witness or assist at the fruit-gathering, to betake

themselves to the orchard. I have sent plenty of chairs for the lazy ones. Theresa, my darling, mind you don't fatigue yourself too much."

Philip assured the anxious mother that he would see to this; and then, drawing Theresa's arm within his own, he again marched off with her through the open French window, and nearly knocked down Lawrence Singleton, who was standing in one of his dreamy fits under the shadow of the wall.

Caroline was following closely, intending to join this first pair when they reached the orchard; but, perceiving Lawrence, she paused, and asked him if he was not coming with the others.

"I will come with you," he replied, quickly; "because I believe you will neither expect me to talk nonsense nor to listen to unmeaning gossip. Don't you know, Miss Ashton, that there are moments when everything around you appears flat, stale, and unprofitable—when the soul

seems struggling to free itself from its narrow prison, and to mount into other and far different regions? Music has always this effect upon me. I have heard you play once before."

"Indeed. I fancied this was our first meeting."

"Yes; but I heard you at a distance. You sang, too. Shall you sing to-night?"

"Probably; for Theresa and I have practised a duet together. Miss Berrington has a very sweet, plaintive voice."

"Has she? Nature has been most bountiful then, in all respects, to that young lady."

"She is, indeed, very lovely. I never saw so winning and attractive a countenance before."

"The perfection of physical beauty. If there is any truth in the legends concerning the angels who gave up heaven for love of the daughters of men, I could fancy these beguiling creatures such as Theresa Berrington."

Caroline smiled quietly, and thought all this very satisfactory; but there was some mystery still. Lawrence could not fail to perceive the devoted attentions Theresa was receiving from Philip Maranham, a man as young and infinitely better looking than himself. If he really loved her, would he not be restless, uneasy, jealous? But it was quite evident that he regarded it all with perfect indifference—that he intended to make no effort to separate Theresa from her admirer;—nay, that he was well pleased to have Caroline for his own companion; that he talked more freely and unreservedly to her than—from Miss Berrington's account—he was in the habit of doing.

What could be the meaning of it? Had he a heart or not? Caroline had hitherto taken Theresa's view of the character of this eccentric young man; but now she began to reason on all his past and present conduct for herself. She resolved to watch him narrowly—to find out, if possible, of

what materials he was really made. Theresa should not waste her pure, fresh, ardent affections upon a stock or a stone, while there was a warm heart of flesh and blood asking only permission to pour out upon her its richest treasures of love and devotion.

Go on, Caroline Ashton; why do you pause here? Why not let your busy thoughts and active mind weave another scheme of wedded happiness, in which the two in whom you are so greatly interested shall become one for ever? *You* are not scared by the vision of poverty, which haunts the more experienced Mrs. Forrest. Your notions of money, as a necessity of life, are fully as crude and unenlightened as those of Philip himself. Why, then, do you pause abruptly in your castle building, and resolve to banish all such thoughts till some future day?

“You are very silent, Miss Ashton,” said Lawrence, as they entered the orchard gate, and saw Theresa and her companion

already seated under one of the large walnut trees. "Your friend that you brought with you appears to have a commission to talk for himself and you too."

"Jealous at last," thought Caroline, with a strange feeling of pleasure, turning eagerly to look in Lawrence's face. But no symptoms of any kind of emotion were depicted there; and she was provoked to rouse him from his insensibility.

"Yes," she replied. "Mr. Maranham is, indeed, inspired to-day; but I was quite prepared for it, having listened to nothing else but his rhapsodies concerning Theresa since the day he first saw her."

"It is very natural," Lawrence said, in his usual tone of voice: "everybody must admire her. Even Cressingham, who professes to entertain a peculiar aversion to all young girls, would make love to Theresa, if she encouraged him."

"Yet, to-day, he appears fascinated with Mrs. Darlington. They are not far behind us now; and I have just heard

her daring him to mount a ladder, and bring her down an apple she coveted."

"He is amused," said Lawrence, looking round for a moment at the merry pair who were standing amongst the fruit-gatherers, and laughing loudly together: "but, like most of our sex, he would prefer that which costs some trouble to win. You have seen a boy chasing butterflies, and observed, I dare say, that he is only seriously anxious about those that elude his pursuit. Cressingham would require, however, more than the seven-leagued boots to capture the one he has fixed his eye upon."

Lawrence smiled curiously as he said this, and seemed speaking less to Caroline than to himself. She was both startled and mystified; but all possibility of making any further discoveries was prevented by the approach of Mrs. Darlington, who, tapping Miss Ashton on the shoulder, said, with pretended gravity—

"You appear to be burdened with an

uncommonly stupid companion; so just leave him to his prosy meditations, and take a turn with me while my knight-errant risks his life on yonder terrific ladder. See how cautiously he is obliged to proceed, because of the frightful dangers that threaten him. Ah, me! I must close my eyes, lest I take pity on the wretched youth, and order him down ere he has reached the third step of the perilous journey."

Arthur Cressingham, however, in spite of his Parisian boots and highly fashionable toilette, performed the gay widow's bidding with considerable grace; and Mrs. Darlington, after rewarding him with her sweetest smiles, voted the whole party, in its present quiescent state, a complete bore, and insisted that all the young men should follow the example of her chosen knight, and pluck apples for the ladies they had charge of.

Philip heard this command, and instantly sprang upon a ladder that had

been left under a tree by one of the people employed in gathering the fruit. He did not take long to reach the top; and soon returned, bearing in his hand a delicious-looking, rosy apple, which he presented to Theresa. Then turning to the others, who were standing round, he said, carelessly—

“I wouldn’t advise anybody else to try that machine; it’s too old and crazy to bear more than the lightest weight. I heard the man who left it there say it was of no use.”

“Then you have given an indifferent proof of wisdom in venturing upon it, after such a warning,” said Caroline Ashton, reproachfully; but Mrs. Darlington clapped her hands, and exclaimed, in her merry voice—

“But he has given a proof of courage and daring that I admire beyond measure; for I believe he is the only one amongst you who would have done such a thing. The young men of this generation are

frightened to death at a scratched finger. I havn't common patience with them."

"Miss Ashton," said Lawrence quietly,—"you are the only lady not yet provided with an apple. I will bring you one in a few seconds."

Before a word of remonstrance could be uttered by anybody, he had planted his foot upon the proscribed ladder and deliberately commenced the ascent.

"Oh, pray come back!" cried Caroline, eagerly—feeling a sudden, nervous grasp upon her arm, and guessing from whom it proceeded. But Lawrence paid no attention to her request.

"The man's a fool" said Philip, who still stood beside Theresa; "but if he has a fancy for broken bones ——"

"He is not!" in an indignant, hysterical tone, ending in a loud scream from Theresa, and mingling with the short sound of cracking wood and various exclamations of dismay, closed the scene; and soon left the green orchard to the undisturbed possession of the hired fruit-gatherers.

CHAPTER II.

THE accident was not a very serious one—a bruised arm and a sprained foot being the extent of the injuries received; but the latter was sufficiently painful to render it necessary for Lawrence to return to the house, and the rest of the party good naturedly resisted his entreaties that they should remain and amuse themselves in the orchard.

Mrs. Darlington, who attributed the accident to her own foolish observation, was most assiduous in her attentions to the sufferer, and proposed that, after having his foot bound up, he should recline on the drawing-room sofa, and allow himself to be entertained by the others. Lawrence thanked her, but seemed annoyed at being the object of so much notice. He

said the pain was nothing, and that he should greatly prefer being suffered to pay the penalty of his folly in solitude.

Mrs. Berrington, however, who could be very positive when she liked, took part against him; and, in a wonderfully short space of time, he was comfortably established on an easy couch, and his companions had dispersed about the room, and were amusing themselves as before.

Yet, not quite as before; for Philip was now sitting alone with a book in his hand, which he did not read, because he was looking every minute with angry and suspicious glances from Lawrence to Theresa. The latter was talking in a low voice to Caroline, who tuned her harp in another part of the room; and Mrs. Darlington was flitting backwards and forwards from Lawrence to Arthur Cressingham, and dividing her smiles and anecdotes between them in a most impartial and praiseworthy manner.

We will first linger a moment with the

two younger ladies, and discover what the subject is which so completely engrosses them. It is in answer to some observation of Caroline's that Theresa says—with considerable decision in her voice—

“It is all nonsense to suppose that Mr. Maranham means anything serious, or that his heart is likely to become really interested. I am quite sure he is not a person of deep feelings; and I cannot see why I should undergo the miserable humiliation of confessing an unrequited attachment, to save him from (at most) a little wounded vanity.”

“Theresa, your judgment is wofully blind,” replied Caroline, gravely. “Philip Maranham *has* deep feelings, and a heart that, once wholly given, will not be easily recalled. I do not ask you to say one word to him yourself. I will do it all, and in such a way that you shall lose nothing in his esteem. The merest hint will now suffice, for his suspicions are already excited.”

“Caroline! you expect too much from me,” said Theresa, with tears starting to her eyes. “I know nothing of Mr. Maranham: he may be honourable, or he may not; and think, for one moment, whether *you* would like one young man—a stranger too—to be the confidant of your hopeless love for another.”

“But I should mention no names, Theresa.”

“It would still be the same, since you admit that his suspicions are aroused. Caroline, say no more about it. I hate Philip Maranham—how dared he call Lawrence a fool?—and I would rather die than he should hear my secret from any human lips.”

“This, then, is your final resolve?”

“It is. Now do play something, Caroline, for everybody is looking weary.”

Miss Ashton complied with this request; and her tasteful performance elicited universal applause. Mrs. Darlington was in raptures, and asked the young men

if they could presume to retain their hearts after listening to such divine melody.

Philip scowled impatiently, and made no reply; but Arthur Cressingham, who, during the piece had been vainly trying to engage Theresa in conversation, said, with a meaning look towards Lawrence Singleton—

“There’s one, at least, who has had both heart and soul charmed away. Miss Ashton may be proud, indeed, in having thawed a region hitherto supposed to be covered with eternal frost.”

The arrow glanced harmlessly over the mailed breast of the abstracted Lawrence; but it entered into the heart of an already stricken deer, and rankled there more painfully than the archer guessed, or perhaps intended it to do.

“If you wish to confer on me a great favour, Caroline,” whispered Theresa, a few minutes later, “you will go and talk to Lawrence while I play an accompani-

ment for Isabel to sing. Dear Caroline, never mind the idle words of that spiteful Arthur Cressingham. I can endure anything but Lawrence watching me. Do go. I am suffering."

No one could doubt the truth of this last assertion; and Caroline, full of pity for Theresa, and desiring earnestly to discover *le mot d'enigme* of all the misunderstanding apparently existing at present at the quiet rectory, walked over to Mr. Singleton's side of the room,—intending, when the music again commenced, to occupy the vacant chair by his sofa, and make him talk to her.

But Mrs. Darlington was some time in determining what she should sing; and both Philip and Mr. Cressingham were employed by the despotic widow in reaching down music books and assisting in the examination of their contents.

During this little interlude, Lawrence turned round suddenly to Caroline, who was standing behind him, and asked her

why she did not take a seat. "Was she afraid of him?" he demanded; "or did she consider his late exploit so contemptible that she intended having nothing more to do with him?"

"Neither," replied Caroline, sitting down immediately, and smiling at the oddity of the question. "I was just going to enquire after your wounded foot."

"Oh! don't remind me, if you can help it, that I have made a fool of myself," he said quickly, adding, more deliberately, and with a sort of quaint bitterness in his voice—"Is it not strange, Miss Ashton, that all our boasted, cherished philosophy, cannot preserve us in a moment of temptation from the commission of the most childish and idiotic act of folly? I care no more for this maimed foot than I should for a passing breeze upon my cheek; but I own it chafes me, to think that I lacked the puny moral courage to endure the imputation of physical cowardice from a chattering woman and two heedless boys."

Caroline smiled again; and Lawrence rightly interpreting it, said, calmly—

“You are thinking that I am oblivious of my own age, in alluding to their greener youth; but we cannot at all times count by years alone, and in heart, feeling, and, I may add, knowledge—though I say it not to boast—I am nearly double the age of either of those young men.”

Caroline could not dissent from this, and her companion, who seemed to be in a talking mood, continued—

“Your friend Theresa looks pale and ill to-day. What is the matter with her?”

This was a puzzling question, and, for a few seconds, Caroline was quite at a loss for an answer that, without violating truth, should be faithful to Theresa's secret. At last she said, awkwardly enough—

“I heard her complaining of the heat some time ago. I do not believe she is very strong.”

“She has too much time for thinking,” said Lawrence abruptly; “and too little that is profitable to think about.”

“Then what would you suggest?” Caroline asked in growing astonishment. “Theresa has abundance of home duties to perform, and home pleasures to enjoy; and if these are not sufficient to fill the serious divisions of her mind, and to satisfy its lighter cravings, I really cannot see what *would* be—unless she were destined for a much higher career than usually falls to the lot of women.”

“I don’t want to make a stateswoman or an authoress of her,” said Lawrence, smiling—perhaps at the thought of Theresa acting in either of these capacities: “but I think, if your little friend read more, and gained rather a larger share of general knowledge than she now possesses, it would strengthen her mind and render her all the happier.”

“Why don’t you tell her this yourself?” Caroline said, on the impulse of the moment. But Theresa had now begun, in a very nervous manner, the accompaniment to her cousin’s song; and Law-

rence indicated that he intended giving his whole attention to the music.

Mrs. Darlington had a clear and well cultivated voice ; but poor Theresa played so badly, that it had never appeared to less advantage ; and about the middle of the song, the widow suddenly closed the music book with a jerk, and said, in rather an impatient tone—

“Why, you little goose, what’s the matter with you? You used to play decently enough ; but I defy St. Cecilia herself to sing to such an accompaniment as this. Go along, my dear, and when I want to show off again, I will get Miss Ashton to assist me.”

Theresa could only falter out something about a headache and stupidity ; for at that moment Dr. and Mrs. Berrington, followed by a servant with the tea equipage, came into the room, and every body was soon engaged in helping either themselves or others to the refreshing beverage.

The mistress of the mansion sat at a large round table, with Mrs. Darlington and Miss Ashton on either side of her. The rector faced his wife, and had Philip on his right hand and Arthur Cressingham on his left. Theresa, who had been dispatched on some errand of her mother's, was about to seat herself, when she returned, between the latter and Caroline Ashton; but her father said, merrily—

“There's no room for you here Tessie. I can't bear to see ladies all crowded together. Ask one of these gentlemen to place the little table beside the sofa of our poor lame friend there, and you go and cut his bread and butter for him.”

Philip looked as if the instant annihilation of the unconscious rector would have been the only satisfaction his feelings were capable of receiving; and albeit, not usually backward in acts of gallantry, he resolutely kept his seat; but Arthur Cressingham sprang up at once, and fetching the table, placed it as close to Law-

rence's sofa as it could possibly be made to stand. Passing Theresa, when this task was accomplished, he looked searchingly into her blushing face, and said, in a low, but evidently mocking voice—

“For once I have been enabled to render Miss Berrington a service, which I humbly trust will ensure me the gratitude it certainly deserves.”

Theresa's cheeks only took a deeper dye, as she walked on quickly without answering her tormentor, and sat down in the chair he had not forgotten to place for her.

Lawrence was reading with apparently absorbed attention; but when Theresa had given him his tea, and they were all talking and laughing at the other table, he put down his book and said quietly—

“How badly you played just now. Who taught you music?”

This was surely a strange welcome, and quite a novel mode of rewarding a lady's kindness; but there was no shadow of

resentment in Theresa's voice as she replied—

“I only learnt a little at school, and I am so lamentably stupid about everything.”

“But your cousin said you used to play better. Why don't you practise more?”

“Rather, why should I?” answered Theresa, with sudden desperation. “Nobody cares whether I play well or ill.”

“Are not your father and mother fond of music?” asked Lawrence, continuing, all unmoved, to eat and drink what his attentive companion placed before him.

“Not particularly,” she said, a little pettishly, now. “If they had been, I dare say I should have taken more pains in learning.”

“You think yourself capable, then, of exertion for those you esteem or love.”

Theresa's soft eyes seemed to expand and glow, as for one instant they were raised to the face of her questioner, while she replied in a trembling voice—

“There is nothing I would not at least attempt for any one I —— cared for.”

“But ‘cared for’ is such a vague description of feeling. You care a little for all your friends, I presume. We will take Arthur Cressingham, for instance, because I know you care something for him. Now, if he asked you to cultivate the science of music, and assured you that your compliance would afford him pleasure, what answer should you make?”

“I should probably thank him for taking so much interest in my proceedings, but decline giving myself any additional trouble on his account.”

Lawrence smiled in his odd, dry way; but whether at his own thoughts, or at what Theresa had said, she had no idea in the world. Presently, however, he added—

“And if *I* made the same request to you, Miss Berrington, am I to infer that your answer would be equally encouraging?”

What a question! What an unheard of—unjustifiable—almost cruel—method, poor Theresa thought, of forcing from

her the cherished weakness of her foolish heart. She was in the act of pouring some milk into Lawrence's cup when he thus addressed her; but she paused suddenly, changed from red to pale, and from pale to red, and, finally, still holding the silver cream-jug in her trembling fingers, fixed on him a look so sad, so deprecating, and yet so unconsciously beaming with a girl's pure, fresh, unsullied devotion, that Lawrence—cold, insensible, or heartless as he appeared—was for the moment sufficiently softened to withdraw his gaze abruptly from Theresa's tender regard, while there gathered over his sallow face, a warmer hue than was often seen to kindle there.

This lasted only a few seconds: then he seemed to shake off, almost disdainfully, the unwonted emotion; and raising his eyes again, with a smile, he took the cream-jug from Theresa's hand, pressed the small fingers lightly in his own, and said quickly—

“Will you do it, to give me pleasure, Theresa?”

The red lip quivered visibly—the blue-veined eyelids drooped—the warm hand closed impulsively over his own—and Lawrence must have felt that he was answered.

Just then, while they were both entirely oblivious, or unmindful of the presence of others, Arthur Cressingham happened to look round. Theresa caught his eye as she withdrew her hand from the pressure in which it had been for a brief instant held, and the smile of saucy intelligence, mingled with a dash of contempt that played upon his handsome features, annoyed more than it surprised her. Immediately after this, he said, aloud,—as though it were a sudden thought,—

“By the bye, Miss Berrington, we must not forget to petition for your favourite song to-night. I am quite sure you are in excellent voice for it. You know, of

course, which I mean—"I love, and I am loved' "

"Sing it if you can," whispered Lawrence, "and never heed the unprovoked attacks of a spoiled boy like Cressingham. Put on a strong armour of dignity, Theresa, and he will soon abandon the warfare."

Lawrence had no need to give this injunction now. The little wounded, shrinking girl was suddenly encased in an armour of triple steel that was formed not only to resist the pointed darts of an Arthur Cressingham, but to protect her from the assaults of the whole human race.

A summer wind had passed over the wintry desert of her heart, and flowers were blooming brightly where the frost and the snow had lain.

During the rest of the evening Theresa seemed inspired. She talked, she laughed, she sang—not only the duet with Caroline, but the one Mr. Cressingham had asked

for, which was rapturously encored by that gentleman, and warmly applauded by all the party, though it is probable that the fair songstress heard amidst the tumult but a single voice which whispered in her ear the friendly words—

“You have done very well Theresa; I perceive that you are a brave little heroine after all.”

Philip Maranham, who had not seen what Arthur Cressingham saw, and who could detect no increased attention on the part of Lawrence to Theresa, was beyond measure puzzled to account for the change in the latter. Her manner towards Philip was much kinder and warmer than it had been before; and when a little dance was proposed, Theresa herself offered to become his partner.

“What a nice pair those two would make,” whispered Isabel Darlington to Caroline.

Caroline answered—“They would, indeed;” and added, that there was already very warm admiration on one side.

“ Warm as it is,” replied the widow, “ it will never spread to the other, in spite of all laws of sympathy and reciprocity. Hav’nt you discovered that *ma belle petite cousine* is wearing her foolish heart out in a romantic passion for that long-legged, book-learned, unsociable animal on the sofa? My dear Miss Ashton, although I have only been a few hours in his society, I am morally certain that he has no more heart than a pumpkin. If Tessie is mad enough to marry him, she will freeze to death in less than a twelvemonth.”

“ But if he has no heart there can be no chance of his wanting her to marry him.”

“ I don’t know. People do not always love with their hearts ; but we will talk of this another time, for I mean to come and see you very often, Miss Ashton.”

The party did not break up till a late hour, for Caroline could not persuade Philip that they ought to be home early ; and although she was quite wearied herself, she forbore to press the subject when

he spoke of his keen enjoyment of the evening.

When, at length, he did consent to tear himself away, he said—and said truly—that his heart and soul remained at the rectory.

CHAPTER III.

THERESA looked none the worse, but rather the better, the next morning, for the almost sleepless night she had passed; and getting up at a much earlier hour than usual, she went down stairs, to put in execution a little project that had suddenly suggested itself to her. This was to send over to Mrs. Forrest a large basket full of the fruit which had been gathered the previous day, and amongst which she slipped in the following brief little note to Caroline Ashton:—

Dearest Caroline,—

“Will you be very much surprised to hear that, during a long, nearly sleepless night, I have formed a resolution of becoming exceedingly industrious! You

know I played shamefully last evening, and Isabel says it is a disgrace to me; and I really begin to think so too. I intend, therefore, to avail myself, at once, of the many kind offers you have made me of becoming my instructress in music and singing; and I will run down to the cottage sometime to-day for the first lesson. With a thousand kisses to Mrs. Forrest and yourself,

“Believe me,

“Ever yours,

“THERESA.”

“Do not forget to remember me to Mr. Maranham.”

If poor Philip had known that Theresa had herself forgotten all about him till just as she was going to seal the note, he would not have listened to that little sentence so rapturously, nor recalled with such vivid satisfaction as he did the numerous trite sayings respecting a lady's postscript containing the pith, or disclosing the real purpose of her letter.

“As it was, he felt exalted to the seventh heaven of delight; and Caroline saw that everything was conspiring to nourish and confirm the passion which she still felt must be, in the end, a most unhappy one.

In the mean time, Theresa, having dispatched a servant with her offering, walked out into the quiet garden, intending to refresh herself with the cool morning breezes—and, perhaps, enjoy another delicious reverie—before entering upon the duties of the day.

First of all, though, she must run and look at her beautiful pony, which had hitherto, since the first evening of possessing it, afforded her so little satisfaction. Now, however, it was very different. Lawrence was kind again—kinder and more tender than he had ever been. She could not, surely, be in error concerning his feelings now!—he must mean her to understand that he loved her; and, for her own heart, there was small need to question *that*,

when its every fibre had long been so closely entwined round one image, that she felt death alone would have the power of loosening those loving tendrils.

The unconscious pony having been visited and caressed, and called repeatedly, in his own young mistress's softest tones, by the new name she had given it of "Gipsy King," Theresa returned musingly to the garden, and throwing herself upon a wooden seat, closed her sparkling eyes and retreated, for a few happy minutes, into that wondrous and dazzling dream-land where young hearts are so apt to wander, and to pluck the sweet but poisoned berries which grow on its shining trees.

"A fair morning, Miss Berrington, and one that I should have pronounced more favourable for healthful exercise than for balmy slumbers, had not the graceful vision before me rebuked my premature judgment."

This was no voice from radiant dream-

land, but rather the one calculated above all others to recall Theresa from that enchanted region ; and reluctantly unclosing her blue eyes, she met the admiring gaze of Arthur Cressingham, who, throwing away the cigar he had been smoking, coolly seated himself beside her.

“Now, pray don’t run away immediately, Miss Berrington,” he continued, as Theresa was rising to go. “I have got something to say to you. I have, upon my honour.”

“Then please to say it quickly,” replied Theresa ; “for I have already wasted more time than I am justified in doing.”

“You are not often such an early wanderer ; but, perhaps, you could not sleep ?”

“You have guessed rightly, Mr. Cressingham. But what have you to say to me ?”

“Patience, fair lady ! I shall come to that immediately. I am first bound to condole with you on having passed a restless, wakeful night. Pray tell me what

considerate pain or malady it was that, in banishing sleep from your pillow, omitted to leave on your blooming cheek any traces of its unwelcome presence?—for you never looked more fresh or beautiful than you do this morning.”

“I suffered no pain,” replied Theresa, passing by his commonplace flattery: “but the moon, which was very brilliant last night, shone into my room so vividly, that I found it impossible to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time. Have you never been kept awake from the same cause?”

“I believe not, Miss Berrington,” he said; adding, with emphasis—“Moreover, I became finally convinced yesterday evening that no moon would ever shine very vividly on me, although I could welcome and cherish its soft rays as gratefully, and, perhaps, more warmly than another may do. But this is idle talk, and I see that I am wearying you.”

Arthur Cressingham had for once laid

aside his taunting manner and spoken with apparently sincere feeling. Theresa was sufficiently touched by the change to reply, gently—

“If you will excuse me, I must say good bye for the present. I am sure mamma is searching for me.”

“Well, I will not detain you two seconds. Do you know anything of Lady Singleton?”

Theresa started and blushed deeply as she answered, rather shortly—

“No, of course, I do not.”

“Shall I tell you what I know of her?”

“I do not particularly wish to hear. It cannot signify to me.”

“Oh! you may chance to become acquainted with her some day, through your friend, Miss Ashton; and it is useful, at times, to have a little knowledge of persons with whom we are to be brought in contact.”

“Well, what of her, then? She is not an Ogress, I presume?”

“No; but she is ambitious and weak-minded—a combination of qualities with which it is very difficult to deal.”

“I will not believe that she is anything of the sort,” said Theresa, indignantly. “Her former friends may have circulated such a slander, being envious of her accession to rank and fortune; but does it stand to reason, that a woman who has but just come into a splendid estate of seven thousand a year should be ambitious of gaining more; or that having, for only a few months, heard herself styled ‘my lady,’ she should be ambitious of being addressed as ‘your grace?’”

“Perhaps not, Miss Berrington: but women, in these cases, begin to be ambitious for their children—desiring them to form wealthy and titled alliances. I make no doubt that Lady Singleton is perfectly contented with her *individual* share of the pomps and vanities of our wicked world.”

Theresa understood him now; but this

arrow was comparatively a harmless one. A girl who loved as she loved, could not at present look beyond the sunny point of believing her wealth of love returned. Farther on, the prospect might be cold, barren, and grey as northern mountains or November woods; but there, in that one spot where the sun poured all its dazzling rays, her charmed eyes must rest, heedless of whatever might hereafter be forced within their vision.

“Thank you, Mr. Cressingham,” Theresa said, quietly, “for your valuable hints, which, if circumstances should ever bring me in contact with the lady they concern, I will not fail to remember.”

She then rose, bowed to her companion, and went into the house.

Lawrence did not come down to breakfast; and Mrs. Berrington explained to her daughter, whose eyes turned involuntarily to the vacant seat, that he was suffering considerably from his sprained foot, and would, probably, stay up stairs all day.

Theresa bent over her cup to hide the sorrow and disappointment she felt her face was revealing; and Mrs. Darlington, turning to her aunt, said, with her usual plainness of sentiment—

“I don’t believe a word about his being in pain. I’ts a shabby excuse for indulging his abominable taste for those musty scientific books, not one syllable of which, I am perfectly certain, any living being can understand.

“Not even the worthies who wrote them, Bella?” asked the rector—who was always greatly amused by his niece’s eccentric observations.

“Assuredly not, my dear uncle,” she replied, gravely; “but you men are too credulous by half. I see through a thing in one second; and those who would impose upon me must scrub and varnish up their brains a little more than people of our day are in the habit of doing.”

“You represent yourself as a very formidable personage,” said Arthur Cres-

singham, addressing the widow. "We must all be on our good behaviour before you it seems."

"Oh! as for you young men, I take no credit to myself for reading your characters at a single glance. I don't dislike *you* at all, Mr. Cressingham; and that Mr. Maranham, who came yesterday with Theresa's nice friend, Miss Ashton, I think quite adorable. As Mr. Singleton is absent I won't backbite him now; but I must relieve my feelings by saying, that if ever he marries—which he is not very likely to do—his wife will die of a book-fever in six months. Tessie, my dear, if it's all the same to you, I should prefer my chocolate without pepper."

Theresa thought her cousin would never finish talking, and that the breakfast would never be over; but, at length she was released, and then, having little hope of seeing Lawrence during the day, she asked permission of her mother to spend it at the cottage.

Mrs. Berrington had no objection ; and the widow hearing what was in contemplation, declared she would accompany her cousin, as she wished to have a chat with Miss Ashton. Theresa could have dispensed with her society, and she did hint something about etiquette requiring Mrs. Forrest or Caroline to call first ; but Isabel Darlington laughed at these scruples—

“My dear child, if you like to narrow your mind to the compass of such childish conventionalities, you are at perfect liberty to do so ; but everybody has not the same taste, as I had the honour of observing to you just now, when you were going to pepper my chocolate.”

CHAPTER IV.

PHILIP had asked Caroline to stroll with him in the garden after breakfast; and they had just taken the third round, when Mrs. Darlington and Theresa appeared in sight. Philip uttered an exclamation of rapture, and hastened into the lane to meet them—quite forgetting, in his eagerness to secure the younger lady, to return the cheerful greeting of the elder one, and thereby forfeiting the high place he had already gained in her esteem—Mrs. Darlington observing afterwards to Caroline, that when love made a gentleman oblivious of good manners, it had degenerated too much for her to have any sympathy with it. At present she only said—

“My dear Miss Ashton, I have come to see you—so don’t, on any account, disturb

the excellent lady with whom you are residing. Let us walk a little round this charming garden. I dare say Theresa and Mr. Maranham can amuse each other."

Theresa, however, had already gone into the house in search of Mrs. Forrest, and Philip was watching for her reappearance with the most intense interest.

"Oh, never mind them," exclaimed Mrs. Darlington, observing that Caroline lingered in the same spot. "They wouldn't thank us—or, at least, the gentleman would not—for being too attentive to their movements. You and I, who are not in love, had much better pair off quietly together."

Caroline said that it would be a lovely morning for a walk to the "bennel," and proposed that they should all four go there together. Mrs. Darlington was delighted with the idea; and when Theresa returned to the garden, her consent was easily obtained, and Philip looked as if the whole world's happiness had

descended upon him at once—and he was the lighter for the enchanting burden.

Theresa had too deep a mine of sweet and blissful thoughts within to be otherwise than lively and agreeable to her companion; and that companion happening to be Philip Maranham, every word which fell from her lips was as fresh and delicious honey to him—in which he neither knew nor cared, at that time, whether poison were concealed.

“What do you think about those two, Miss Ashton?” asked Mrs. Darlington, who had not scrupled, during the walk, to make herself merry at their expense.

Caroline said she thought there was too much sincerity on one side to render a constant intercourse desirable; but that she had neither the right nor the power to interfere.

“And wherefore should you?” rejoined the widow, quickly. “Young men don’t die for love in these money-worshipping days. A serious passion in their spring

time does them a world of good ;—besides, it is a charity to Theresa to keep her away from that moonstruck genius at the rectory. Better marry Philip Maranham and take in sewing, than become the wife of Lawrence Singleton and pine to death in a palace.”

“I cannot help thinking,” observed Caroline, “that you are mistaken in your judgment of Mr. Singleton. There is often the deepest feeling hidden under a cold exterior.”

“Possibly : but there is nothing of the sort hidden under his. If he has any concealed passion, it is ambition—ambition to emulate the prosy old idiots, whose thoughts he must long ago have made his own.”

“Do you mean that he desires to become an author ?”

“I think it likely. He is quite disagreeable enough for one.”

“Then you are of opinion that he does not return the partiality with which you say Theresa regards him.”

“Ah! now you have come to that, I will tell you what are my ideas on the subject. He sees that she is simple enough to have set up in her heart his own ugly image to worship, and he feels (with the little human sensibility he possesses) that she is marvellously beautiful, and likely to be generally desired. If he has sufficient energy to resist the opposition his family would, in all probability, make to such a match, I believe he will marry my pretty cousin; but, as I before observed, I hope, for her sake, that circumstances will prevent the sacrifice.

“Well,” said Caroline, thoughtfully—“I cannot quite agree with you; for even supposing your view of his character a correct one, I am inclined to imagine, that if Theresa really loves him, she would be happier as his wife than separated altogether from him.”

“Excuse me, my dear Miss Ashton, but you are talking of things you can know nothing in the world about. Take my

advice, and never try such an experiment yourself. Love is a fine ingredient in married life; but when it's all on one side, depend upon it, the pleasant flavour is exchanged for something infinitely more bitter than you or I should enjoy. But here we are close at home again, and I must wish you good bye for the present."

The widow nodded to Theresa and Mr. Maranham, and shaking Caroline warmly by the hand, took the road leading to the rectory.

As the remaining three entered the cottage, Tantalus and Charon rushed to meet their master; and Philip, after noticing them himself, tried to make them evince some testimony of regard towards Theresa; but the dogs turned from her, and fawned affectionately and familiarly upon Caroline, who patted them quietly and appeared entirely free from her former terrors.

"Nice creatures," said Theresa—"how soon they learn to distinguish those from whom they receive kindness."

“Stupid idiots, rather,” replied Philip; “for Miss Ashton never even speaks to them, and you would occasionally give the poor beasts a friendly word, if you were here.”

Caroline made no reply to this; and as her veil was down, nobody could discover whether she felt wounded by it or not.

Mrs. Forrest was delighted to have her little friend to spend a long day at the cottage. She was glad, too, to see Theresa looking so blooming again, and to hear her laugh as she used to do. The gentle widow might have added, that she rejoiced also—though against her reason and judgment—to witness the full and perfect contentment of one who daily wound himself closer and closer round her loving heart, and who² was fast reconciling the melancholy recluse to a world she had formerly had so much reason to hold in detestation.

The object of Theresa's present visit was not, however, forgotten; and Caroline shut herself up with her pupil from the time of

their return home till just before their early dinner hour, when they all again met together, and formed a very merry, sociable little party.

The evening was devoted to music and reading, diversified occasionally by a stroll round the garden, where they watched the red sun setting behind the hills, and talked of poetry, and love, and all things appertaining to youth's radiant paradise, till each young heart beat with strange and varied emotions, and one amongst them glowed with that ardent fire which, when kindled in a passionate nature, demands so many of the soul's bitterest tears to quench it.

When the hour of parting came, Philip insisted on taking Theresa home, and Caroline, for some reason best known to herself, turned a deaf ear to Mrs. Forrest's whispered entreaties that she should accompany them.

CHAPTER V.

THE next morning Lawrence Singleton came down to breakfast. Theresa was seated near her mother when he entered suddenly, limping, not very gracefully, on one leg. Dr. and Mrs. Berrington inquired anxiously concerning his injured foot. Mrs. Darlington laughed openly at him; and Theresa betrayed so much confusion that her mother could not avoid perceiving it, and having some vague suspicion aroused.

Lawrence himself appeared in very dejected spirits; he ate little, and answered in abrupt monosyllables every question that was addressed to him. To Theresa he did not speak at all; but she hoped that during the morning an opportunity would occur for seeing him alone, when she might tell him that she had already taken the

first step towards the cultivation of the talent he delighted in. And this opportunity was soon afforded her.

Mrs. Berrington, albeit abundantly supplied with cupboards and store-closets in every part of the house, had latterly taken possession of one in her husband's study, and requiring, during the morning, some article of domestic service that was kept there, she despatched Theresa to fetch it, believing the rector to be with both his pupils in the library.

Her daughter, being under the same impressiou, went in quickly and walked straight to the cupboard, without looking towards any other part of the room; but just as she had taken out what her mother wanted, and was turning to go away, the rustling of leaves attracted her attention, and glancing round, with a sudden throb at her heart, she saw Lawrence seated in the window recess, apparently copying something from a large book before him.

“Come here, Theresa,” he said; and she

went obediently and stood silent by his side.

“Do you think,” he continued, “that you could have patience to write all day long on subjects that were alike uninteresting and incomprehensible to you—that your little fingers would not grow weary, nor your bright eyes sleepy, over such an uncongenial task? You said, the other night, that there was nothing you could not do for one you loved. Could you do this, Theresa?”

“Certainly, for one I loved—and far more than this,” she answered quickly, her whole earnest spirit glowing in her beaming face.

He looked at her intently for a few minutes, heedless of the changing cheek and trembling lip—perhaps, unconscious that such indications of powerful emotion were being exhibited. But as he gazed, his own countenance underwent a transformation—the cold, fixed eye expanded—the hard lines round the mouth relaxed—

the complexion itself became more lifelike ; —and at length a smile of intense satisfaction illuminated the entire aspect, as, taking Theresa's passive hand, he said, feelingly,—

“ You should have been kept to bloom amongst the flowers of paradise. I cannot see that you have any vocation here. At any rate, it is not that of——”

“ What ?” asked Theresa, with an attempt to smile, though her heart was beating so rapidly that she found it difficult to speak.

“ Never mind now,” replied Lawrence, almost fondling the little hand that remained within his own : “ we will talk of all this at some future time. You were absent nearly the whole of yesterday, were you not ?”

“ Yes. I went to take a music lesson of Miss Ashton. I am going again to-day —and every day that mamma can spare me.”

“ Miss Ashton is very kind to you.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Theresa, warmly, though not quite without a vague pang of jealousy, which betrayed itself by her saying—

“Do you not admire her very much, and think her superior to the generality of young ladies?”

“I have known so few young ladies,” Lawrence answered, “that I cannot presume to draw comparisons; but I do think Miss Ashton a clever, agreeable, and most pleasing-looking girl. Does this satisfy you, Theresa?”

Theresa said it was scarcely doing justice to her friend; but in her heart she was abundantly satisfied—feeling instinctively that, if he had multiplied by a thousand degrees such ordinary commendations, it would still have fallen far short of the few simple words concerning the flowers of paradise, which he had so recently addressed to herself.

“And now,” continued Lawrence, abruptly relinquishing his companion’s

hand, "I must return to other thoughts and other converse. The human mind is a strange thing, Theresa; but here I will not even try to make you follow me. When this maimed foot of mine is well, we will have another gallop together."

Theresa would fain have lingered yet a little while, but there was something in the very voice of the man she loved which irresistibly compelled obedience; and now, without a word, she left him to his lonely studies, and quietly resumed the duties in which she had been previously engaged.

And all that day a bird sang sweetly in her heart, and its words were those of the song that Arthur Cressingham had first heard her singing—

* * * * *

"I see I shall soon lose my pupil," said Caroline Ashton, one evening at the conclusion of the music lesson.

"Why," replied Theresa, quickly, and looking quite alarmed. "What is going to happen?"

“Something very serious, indeed. No less a misfortune than the pupil getting in advance of her instructress. Upon my word, Theresa, I am in earnest; you have made a startling improvement. Does not Mrs. Darlington think so?”

“I seldom practise when she is in the room.”

“Well, does not Mr. Cressingham think so?”

“I have never given him an opportunity of judging.”

“Well, then, does not Mr. Singleton think so?”

“You are extremely persevering, Caroline; but, however, I have no objection to tell you that Mr. Singleton says I play and sing much better; and that, in time, I may do both without disgracing myself.”

“Vastly encouraging, no doubt. Is he to call for you this evening?”

“I suppose so. Papa thinks him a more sober escort than Arthur Cressingham would be.”

"Sober enough, in all conscience, I should imagine. A sort of cooling sedative after Philip Maranham."

"Philip Maranham! It is ever Philip Maranham with you, Caroline. To me his absence is a great relief."

"You are ungrateful, Theresa. He has surely done nothing to offend you?"

"Certainly not to offend me; but—but—in short, I could not like him; and I am glad he is away."

"He will return in a week at farthest."

"Well, for dear Mrs. Forrest's sake, I will try to feel pleased. How do you feel on the subject, Caroline?"

"Perfectly tranquil and composed, as I hope through my life to feel on all subjects."

"Ah! you are a strange, out-of-the-common-way sort of being. Let us come to the window now, Carry. The days are getting so short and gloomy, and this evening it appears more sombre and melancholy than usual."

“Yes; and the October winds are blowing keenly without. See what a collection of dead leaves have been scattered upon the lawn since morning. Do you like the winter nights, Theresa?”

“In my own home I do; because everything there puts on then an aspect of comfort and cheerfulness. Mamma and I sit with our work by a blazing fire, papa reads aloud to us, and we are always very, very happy. But alone, or amongst strangers, where no loving voice would answer my own—where I should miss the dear, familiar faces, and the fond looks and words to which I have ever been accustomed—oh! in such circumstances, I should dread and detest the long winter evenings, and tremble at every gust of wind that blew.”

“Heaven preserve you from being tried in this way, Theresa. Your nature has not been provisioned for the endurance of neglect or unkindness. Mrs. Forrest is always hoping that you will be content to

abide under the shelter of the parental wing, until years and experience have hardened that little sensitive heart, and fitted you, in some measure, for the buffetings of life."

Theresa was resting her head against the window shutter, and her face was quite concealed from the observation of her companion : but, before she said a word, Caroline knew that she was crying gently, and her own feelings at that moment sympathized entirely with those of her weaker friend.

" Surely it is getting very late," observed the latter, after a considerable pause. " Mr. Singleton has always come earlier than this. Let us go and find Mrs. Forrest now ; she will think we do not care for her society."

Caroline assented to this proposition, and they went together to the little parlour, where the widow was sitting reading by the cheerful light of wax candles, and in front of a most inviting-looking fire.

“Ah! this is better,” said Theresa, eagerly advancing her cold fingers to the warmth, and kneeling by Mrs. Forrest’s chair. “My gloomy visions are fast retreating in presence of such substantial comfort, though I do not much relish the idea of going from such a scene into the chill, wintry air.”

“Poor darling!” said Mrs. Forrest, stroking her sunny ringlets. “I wish you would stay and sleep here. We can easily send back Mr. Singleton, when he arrives, to tell your mamma we have kept you for the night.”

Theresa could not immediately answer, for she felt that Caroline’s eye was fixed upon her, and she expected to read in its calm gaze, reproach for the hypocrisy of her complaint. Nevertheless, there was a fascination in these bright twilight walks, silent though they generally were, with him she so madly loved, that all the Miss Ashtons in the world could not have made her, even for once, relinquish; and, after

an embarrassed pause, she said, eagerly,—

“Oh, I know, my dear Mrs. Forrest, I must not stay; and, indeed, it is childish to speak of the cold now, when winter has not even begun. I cannot think what keeps Mr. Singleton so late.”

As she uttered the last word, the garden bell sounded, and Theresa, with a look of joyous animation, which ill accorded with her professed dread of the wintry atmosphere, seized her bonnet and shawl, and was hastily equipping herself, when Susan threw open the parlour door and announced—

“Mr. Cressingham!”

Everybody started a little and looked surprised, because, during the whole period that Philip had been absent, Lawrence Singleton had always acted as an escort to Theresa, on the occasions of her passing the afternoon at the cottage. But Theresa herself gave tokens, not only of surprise but of alarm, for she became suddenly pale, and exclaimed, in a voice tremulous with emotion—

“Is anything the matter at home, Mr. Cressingham?”

The Honourable Arthur hastened to dissipate her alarm.

“Nothing more serious has occurred, Miss Berrington, than a summons from Lady Singleton to her son, who, having only one evening to prepare for his journey, has been obliged to decline, for once, the honour of attending you home. Unworthy substitute as I feel myself to be, I hope you will not refuse to entrust yourself to my charge, since your excellent parents have deemed me a fitting delegate.”

Theresa made no reply to this courtly speech; but she managed to jerk off the string of her bonnet and to prick her finger severely with the pin of her shawl. Whether her feelings received any satisfaction from these little accidents, I am not prepared to say; but it is certain that she bade her friends good night in a very abrupt and absent manner, and finally walked away with her smiling escort in a

mood to which an indulgent observer might apply the term "thoughtful," but which her enemies would assuredly have designated by a harsher name."

"My dear," said Mrs. Forrest to Caroline, when they had been left a few minutes alone, "I believe I have made a discovery."

Caroline looked up from her work and smiled. "What is it, and whom does it concern?"

"It concerns Theresa; and it is—what indeed I have long anticipated as probable—that she has lost her heart to that good looking and clever young man."

"Good looking, dearest Mrs. Forrest! Why, even Theresa herself acknowledges that he is very plain."

Plain! Why, then, the girls of this generation must have totally different ideas of beauty to those that were entertained in my young days. I do not remember ever having seen a handsomer or more distinguished looking person than Arthur Cressingham."

“Arthur Cressingham!” said Caroline, laughing. “Oh, I was not thinking of him. I fancied you alluded to ——.” She paused here, being nervously sensitive on the subject of her promise to Theresa; and Mrs. Forrest, who certainly was not famous for penetration, eagerly put in the name that was so much more constantly in her thoughts than Lawrence Singleton’s.

“Philip you mean, of course; but indeed, my love, I have very little hope that Theresa cares for him. Once, as you know, I would not have had her do so for the world; but now I can wish nothing so earnestly, since it is evident that his whole heart and soul are bound up in her; and who, that loved him, would not do everything in their power to promote an union on which the happiness of his life depends. Ah, Caroline, you, who are not related to my poor boy, who see only his wayward follies, can form no idea of the hold he has taken of my heart. I am fondly attached to Theresa and to you, Carry, now; but

Philip is becoming my idol ; and, if he is destined to disappointment and misery, I feel that my existence will return to something far worse than its former gloom."

Caroline had no consolation to give on this subject ; but she had sympathy, warm and true. When the widow looked up, after hiding her agitated face for a few minutes in her hands, she saw that on her silent companion's work large tears were rapidly falling.

CHAPTER VI.

THE dawn was just breaking in the cold grey sky on the following morning, when Theresa crept quietly out of bed and began dressing herself with nervous speed.

She had determined, come what might, to see Lawrence Singleton before he went away.

She had tried every means that human ingenuity could devise to accomplish this purpose the preceding evening; but Mrs. Berrington wanted nothing from the study or library, had no message to send to her husband, and found a thousand things for her daughter to do in their own private apartments.

This was, beyond measure, provoking, especially as Theresa was kept quite in the dark as to the object of Lawrence's sudden

journey ; and she was fearful, by asking a single question, of strengthening the suspicions already excited in her mother's mind.

But it was a weary and an anxious evening ; and when Mrs. Berrington observed that her daughter looked pale, and recommended her to go to bed, Theresa had eagerly caught at the suggestion, and retired to shed, upon her friendly pillow, the tears of vexation and disappointment which, for the last few hours, had been gathering and swelling in her heart.

But vexation and disappointment were only the feelings that agitated the surface of her mind. It was the deeper ones hidden beneath, that made her form the resolution to brave everything from which her timid nature instinctively recoiled, and obtain an interview with Lawrence before he left the house.

She had gleaned the intelligence that only one servant was to get up for the purpose of making breakfast for him, and

that the post chaise would be at the door by seven o'clock.

It was a cold, hazy morning; the sky looked dull and gloomy in the extreme. Theresa thought she had never seen it look so before. The garden trees appeared heavy with damp; and all around the melancholy yellow leaves were lying on the sodden ground. It was a morning to make the most joyous-hearted question the reasonableness of their contentment, and to extract from nature's worshippers the avowal that there is a dark as well as a bright side to the picture. Its effect upon Theresa was inexpressibly saddening; and, by the time her hasty toilette was completed, the tears were again raining down her colourless cheek, and her little heart was beating with a thousand vague fears and inquietudes.

But there was no time to be lost, as it was now nearly half-past six; so opening her door softly, she crept along the passage, descended the stairs, and stationed

herself in the curtained recess of a small ante-room, which separated the breakfast parlour from the hall.

In a few minutes the housemaid arrived to prepare the traveller a solitary meal. Theresa heard her knocking the things about, as if early rising had not improved her temper; and amidst this bustling noise the patient listener failed to catch the sound of Lawrence's approaching footsteps, and was only aware of his presence by hearing him suddenly address the girl—

“It seems a cold morning, Jane. I fear you have been disturbed before your usual time.”

“Oh, we servants hadn't need be partiklar about trifles,” answered the injured Jane.

“Please, sir, do you take tea or coffee?”

“I really do not mind which it is,” said Lawrence. “Give me whatever you like; only be quick, as I have not a minute to spare.”

Jane left the room; but this injunction

to be quick, and which, for her own sake, it was highly probable the girl would comply with, determined Theresa on remaining where she was till the breakfast was concluded. She knew it could not occupy many minutes, and that Lawrence must pass the ante-room to get into the hall. Her only fear was that Jane, in the hope of obtaining a gratuity, would become officious at the last, and keep by the traveller till he was fairly in the carriage.

But fortune stood her friend, and prevented such a wretched *contretemps* as this would assuredly have been.

About five minutes after Lawrence had been seated at table, Theresa heard the post chaise rattle up to the door; and, nearly at the same moment, Jane came into the breakfast room by an entrance that communicated with the kitchen, and announced the fact to the young man—adding the intimation that if he wished to catch the Oxendean coach he must “look sharp.”

Surely," thought poor Theresa, "he will now give her some letter or message to deliver to me. He never can intend to go away in this manner."

But nothing of the sort occurred. Whatever Lawrence gave, it was quite evident to Theresa that Jane was to be the only recipient of it, for she heard the girl say, in a well pleased tone—

"Oh, thank you, sir, indeed; but I'm sure, sir, I was very pleased to get up for you, sir. I hope you'll have a pleasant journey, and soon come back to us again, sir."

"I'm obliged to you, Jane," he replied, pushing back his chair; "and now you may as well sit down here and finish the capital breakfast I have only had time to begin. This coffee is excellent. Yes, I'll put on my great coat—that will do, Jane, thank you. And now I'm off."

He opened the ante-room door, which had all the time been ajar, and shutting it after him, passed quickly into the apart-

ment where Theresa was so anxiously waiting for him. She did not stir till he had reached the far end; her agitation and nervousness increased every instant; she felt deadly sick, and almost repented the rashness of which she had been guilty. But, as Lawrence grasped the handle of the opposite door, every other dread gave way to that of being too late to speak to him; and, with the courage of desperation, she bounded from her hiding-place, and, catching his arm as he stepped into the hall, pronounced, in a choking, agonizing voice, the single word—

“Lawrence!”

—That name, whispered so often to her heart of hearts, but now uttered for the first time in addressing him who owned it.

He turned round sharply, but without any exclamation; and whatever surprise he might have felt, the expression of it appeared but for a moment on his countenance. Nothing but a quiet concern was painted there, when, in reply to Theresa's passionate appeal, he said—

“This is unwise, inconsiderate of you. You must go back to your bed, poor child! How pale you look!”

Theresa was now sobbing convulsively; and, as he spoke, she hid her face on his shoulder, and clung to him with a wild tenderness that no heart of man could have resisted, while, in broken sentences, she reproached him for leaving her as he had intended to do, and prayed him to forgive her for preventing it.

“Poor girl,” he murmured, gently, parting the hair that had fallen over her face; “a different and a brighter lot should have been yours. Do not cry so, Theresa; it pains me more than you can think. In a few weeks, perhaps, I shall return. I thought it best not to see you—it was for your sake; but I am not angry—how could I be? Take care of yourself while I am away; and promise, now, to return to your bed and try to sleep again.”

As Lawrence ceased speaking there was

a movement in the parlour, as though Jane had heard the voices and was coming to inquire what it meant.

“I must go,” said the young man, with that quiet firmness which Theresa never resisted. “God bless you till we meet again.”

She loosened her arms and raised her crimson face. But this momentary colour, excited by the vivid consciousness of what she had done, faded into deathly paleness as Lawrence moved from her side. He turned once more, saw her deep but now silent, unobtrusive emotion, and his coldness melted like snow in the warm sunbeams.

“Theresa,” he whispered, in a voice tremulous with suddenly awakened passion,—“Theresa, come to me.”

She was in his arms, pressed tightly, strainingly to his beating heart—her cold face and lips covered with his ardent kisses—her tears, no longer bitter ones, falling like gentle raindrops on his glowing cheeks.

“My Theresa,” he whispered, softly. “Mine now! mine always! mine alone! Come what may — oppose who will — to me you must and shall belong. Cheer up, my little girl, my fond and gentle love; hereafter I will have a smile for every tear you are shedding now.”

Theresa drank in his words as though more than life immortal were in the blessed sounds; and when he ceased to speak she once again lifted her radiant face, and clung to him with that tender and most touching confidence which her disposition was so eminently qualified to exhibit.

“You will soon come back. Tell me only this and I shall be happy,” was all she could find courage to say; and Lawrence, pressing her ever closer and closer to his heart, whispered assurances of the briefest possible separation, and promises of a future that should atone for more than the present pain.

How fully and entirely Theresa believed

him might be gathered from the look of deep and settled contentment that mingled with the wild joy painted on her countenance as—after watching the chaise till it was quite out of sight—she ran softly back to her room, and hugged, in its welcome solitude, the mighty happiness which, till now, had existed in her dreams alone.

Leave her for a while to the perfect and undisturbed enjoyment of this first draught from life's enchanted waters. Let her youthful spirit try to grapple those delicious mysteries which have hitherto so dimly revealed themselves to her yearning mind. Meddle not with the heart's first baptism into love's glorious kingdom, nor seek to read with her those stars of unutterable beauty which, from the skies of this fairy kingdom, are shining down deep and ever deeper into her soul !

CHAPTER VII.

THE heavy morning mists had all dispersed, and the sun was shining splendidly, when Theresa left her room and joined Mrs. Berrington at the breakfast table.

“Ah, Tessie, my dear,” said the latter, as her daughter entered, “I am glad to see you down so early. I was thinking of sending you up a cup of tea, for you looked wretchedly pale and ill last night. Do you really feel better?”

“Indeed yes, mamma, I am quite well. How delightfully the sun shines into this room! We scarcely want a fire, though it looks cheerful too. There is certainly something particularly pleasant and inspiring in these bright autumn mornings.”

Mrs. Berrington was rather astonished at this unusual animation on the part of

her quiet little girl, and scrutinizing Theresa's countenance more narrowly, she came to the conclusion that it was undoubtedly genuine, and that therefore Mrs. Darlington's hints and her own recently awakened suspicions concerning her daughter's partiality for Lawrence Singleton must be entirely misdirected.

This was a considerable relief to the affectionate and prudent mother, who felt intuitively that her husband's eccentric and wealthy pupil was by no means and in no way a fitting match for her portionless and gentle-minded Theresa.

"Sit down, my love," she said, after the fond maternal kiss had been given. "We shall have time for a little chat before the rest of our party come in. Do you know that Isabel wants you to return with her and spend a month in London?"

Theresa's colour faded suddenly. "Oh, my dear mamma, you surely would not send me away from you. It is very kind of Isabel, but I do not wish to go to Lon-

don. I could not be happy there. I love Elderton; I would not leave it for the world."

Mrs. Berrington smiled and stroked her daughter's hair. "You shall please yourself, my darling. I have no wish to part with you, only papa thought the change would do you so much good."

"Then I need not go, if I do not like, mamma?"

"Certainly not, my Tessie, and here comes Bella herself; so you had better at once settle the affair between you."

"What's the matter, what's the matter?" exclaimed the widow, as she embraced both her relatives, and looked slyly in her cousin's face. "Does Tessie want to put on crape and bombazine, and are you, aunt, barbarous enough to refuse her. Fie upon your hard-heartedness! Why, I have been myself, since daybreak, turning over all the contents of my drawers and boxes in search of some black ribbons that I fancied I had brought with me, and in

lieu of which, you see, I have clothed myself in sober grey, to express my sense of the irreparable loss we have this morning sustained in the person of Mr. Lawrence Singleton."

Theresa blushed, of course, but she had sufficient presence of mind to compliment Mrs. Darlington on the becomingness of the "sober grey," and then to turn the conversation immediately to the subject of her proposed visit to London, which, in spite of the widow's earnest entreaties to the contrary, she refused positively to undertake at present.

"You are an obstinate, disagreeable little monkey, then," said, at last, the really disappointed Isabel; "and if I were your mother—which, let me tell you, I should be very sorry for—I would find out, by hook or by crook, the secret of your extraordinary attachment to this place. Bless the girl, why, in London, I'd answer for your marrying a peer of the realm, if you liked; while here —— Ah!

good morning, Mr. Cressingham ; I did not see you come in. I was just observing that London and its inhabitants will be perfectly insupportable after the delicious tranquillity and the delightful, social circle of dear, dear Elderton."

"You are not thinking of leaving us yet, I hope," said the young man, politely, while he glanced aside with some curiosity at Theresa, whose radiant face was as great a puzzle to him as it had been to her mother and Mrs. Darlington.

"Well, in consideration of the deep sorrow my absence would occasion you, Mr. Cressingham, I may probably defer my departure for another week," said the widow, who was quite aware of the real bent of the honourable Arthur's inclinations.

"You are excessively kind and condescending," he replied, with a smiling bow ; "and, believe me, I shall not fail to appreciate your goodness as it deserves."

The rector's entrance prevented any

further badinage, and immediately after they all sat down to breakfast.

Reader, if you have ever been in love—and, I suppose the slightest doubt expressed on the subject would be deemed an insult—you must know that there are seasons during the reign of this omnipotent passion, when *to be alone* becomes almost as great a necessity as to breathe the air of heaven—when the presence of even a dearly valued friend is insupportable; and the society of indifferent, and especially talkative persons, a species of purgatory, to which the dungeon or the rack would be infinitely preferable.

Now, this was precisely Theresa's state of feeling on the morning in question; and, after leaving the breakfast table, she invented and rejected a hundred plans for securing to herself the inestimable privilege of uninterrupted solitude, during which she might live over and over again the few intoxicating moments, whose vivid remembrance was stamped in burning

letters on her tender and truly devoted heart.

But fate, in this instance, appeared resolved to oppose her wishes; for Mrs. Darlington followed her like a shadow, and talked more nonsense than Theresa had supposed it possible the mind of any rational being could conceive, much less utter.

What was it to the beloved of Lawrence Singleton that fifty shallow brained, or, at best, ordinarily gifted individuals, were sighing away their souls at the feet of the inexorable and cruel Isabel Darlington—that they all vowed frightful vows of self-destruction, whose accomplishment, the laughing widow declared, was for ever in the future tense? What was it to the earnestly loving Theresa, that her gay and brilliant cousin treated her admirers like slaves—that she believed in, and yet scoffed at their devotion; because she esteemed liberty a more precious inheritance than all the affection men were capable of feeling?

Yet Theresa must listen to, and occasionally smile at this nonsensical though clever prattling. She must forcibly drive back the sweet, thronging fancies that should have been her only companions on this memorable morning, to give polite attention to the persevering witticisms of her mother's guest, who happens to be in one of her sunniest moods, and will have an auditor let the consequences be what they may.

"You are exceedingly entertaining, my love," said Isabel, pausing suddenly in one of her lively narrations, as she detected Theresa trying to conceal a yawn. "There is nothing more gratifying to people gifted with brilliant conversational powers, than to perceive their listeners opening their mouths every two or three minutes as you are doing now. But perhaps you were up early?"

This was only a random shot, as the idea had never suggested itself to the widow until the moment when she gave it

utterance. But Theresa's guilty blushes and confusion would certainly have excited most awkward suspicions, had not Arthur Cressingham entered the room at the same instant, and turned Mrs. Darlington's attention from Theresa to himself.

"I wish one of you ladies would take a ride with me," he said, looking at the widow, but going towards the spot where Theresa stood. "The worthy doctor declares I am not fit for study this morning; and I am quite sure that solitude would agree no better with me. What do you say Miss Berrington to giving the pony a little exercise? The sun is wooing you to come out and enjoy its beams."

Mrs. Darlington will perhaps be your companion," replied Theresa. "The pony is quite at her service; and I am sure a ride will be of benefit to her."

"And relieve you of my society at the same time, Miss Tessie," said the widow, pinching her cousin's cheek good humouredly. "Well, Mr. Cressingham, I con-

sent to place myself under your knightly protection, and to give you an opportunity of making love to me without witnesses—only don't talk nonsense to this silly child while I go to get my habit on."

Theresa was on the point of following Mrs. Darlington from the room, when Arthur Cressingham, in a very earnest voice, entreated her to remain.

"You always try to avoid me," he said, as she turned back quietly and resumed her station by the window; "and though I am too well aware of the dislike with which you regard me, it is not kind of you to force it so constantly upon my notice."

"Indeed, Mr. Cressingham, I do not regard you with any particular dislike," replied Theresa, indifferently; "and I am not conscious of ever having failed in that politeness to which, as a resident in my father's house, you are entitled to expect from me."

"Miss Berrington, your words are very freezing, but they cannot freeze *me*—

would to Heaven they could! A few weeks more and you will be rid of my presence altogether; but I cannot deny myself the satisfaction of telling you now, that, go where I will, see whom I may, your image will never fade from my memory. I am not a sentimentalist, nor can I speak in poetry, or act the despairing lover; but one thing I know, which is this—that, if you had honoured me with a hundredth part of the favour you have shown to another, I would have died rather than leave you for a single week, and laughed to scorn the remonstrances and opposition of every relative I possess in the world.”

Theresa was considerably startled by the vehemence with which this was spoken; but as it did not seem to demand an answer, and she could think of nothing suitable to say, her only plan was to remain silent, which she did accordingly—only gazing more intently out of the window, as though some very interesting object had, all at once, appeared before her sight.

“You will not speak to me, Miss Berrington,” continued the young man, presently. “If I have said anything to offend you, I sincerely entreat your forgiveness. But, surely, it is unjust to resent so deeply my involuntary—and, for me, most unfortunate—appreciation of a loveliness no living man could look upon unmoved.”

“I am not offended,” said Theresa, with considerable embarrassment; “but you must be aware that such language cannot be agreeable to me, and that I should do wrong were I, for one moment, to listen to it. Pray, let us talk of something else.”

Arthur Cressingham looked earnestly at his blushing companion for a few seconds. Then, in his old, mocking, taunting manner, he said, abruptly—

“You young ladies make curious distinctions, upon my honour. I should like to know, now—but never mind for the present. I hear your cousin’s step, and I must defer seeking an explanation till some future time.”

As Mrs. Darlington entered Theresa hurriedly left the room, shunning the widow's archly-inquiring looks, and saying she was going to order the pony to be brought round.

In ten minutes more the equestrians had cantered gaily off, and Theresa was congratulating herself on the prospect of enjoying undisturbed solitude during the rest of the morning.

CHAPTER VIII.

BUT alas ! for all human projects ; for scarcely had Theresa closed fast the door of her own little sanctum, and taken a chair by the open window, where the fresh wind might blow on her now throbbing temples, when a quick footstep sounded along the passage, and was immediately followed by a gentle summons for admittance into the room, where its disappointed occupant had so vainly expected to enjoy perfect quiet and retirement.

“ Oh, Caroline, I did not know it was you. What a surprise ! I have *such* a headache this morning ; but do come in and sit down. You know I am always delighted to see you.”

This was Theresa’s somewhat confused greeting, to which Miss Ashton, who was

looking the personification of serene contentment, replied by an affectionate embrace, and a speedy acceptance of her friend's rather formal invitation.

"I will not make your poor head worse by talking either much or loudly," said the visitor, with her usual consideration; "but I was anxious to see you; and I have, besides, a message from Mrs. Forrest. Tell me, however, first, what has taken Mr. Singleton home. You know his mother is mamma's great friend; and I am, therefore, entitled to feel some degree of interest in the family."

While Caroline spoke, Theresa was inwardly debating whether she should communicate the event of the morning or not. She was quite conscious that Miss Ashton deserved her fullest confidence, and she had an idea that it would be well to gain so disinterested and indulgent a counsellor; but, in spite of all this, there were deeper sentiments which rebelled desperately against the thought of opening

to any mortal vision that fount of sparkling and radiant joy, which had so recently sprung up in her still trembling and half-doubtful heart.

She decided, finally, on concealing, with a miser's jealous care, this sweet and precious secret, whose possession had made the world appear to her so full of light and sunshine.

"Indeed, I am in utter ignorance as to the motives of his leaving us so suddenly," was her rather agitated reply to Caroline's guarded question. "But, I believe he will return in a few weeks.

"Yes; so I concluded. And now for the execution of my errand to the rectory. Mrs. Forrest wishes you all to take tea at the cottage to-morrow. Philip returns this evening; and, as his journey, which you know was about money matters, has been very satisfactory, his aunt is desirous of giving him a cheerful welcome home. She says, Theresa, that your presence will be the best means of insuring this; and I

am commissioned to use all my eloquence in persuading you to come."

"Have you seen mamma yet?"

"No; I heard that you were up stairs, and came straight to your room at once. But I shall not stay now, as I see you are quite unfit for conversation. What about to-morrow?"

"I suppose we shall come. I could not appear unkind to dear Mrs. Forrest, though I am really provoked that Mr. Maranham should not have stayed away a little longer."

"He will never stay long away, Theresa, until he knows there is no hope of gaining your affections."

"Well, I will be as cold as ice to him, if that will please you, Caroline. You cannot wish me to say—'Mr. Maranham, I have no affections to bestow upon you,' before he has expressed any desire to win them."

"Certainly not. Neither have I the right, nor the intention of dictating to you

in the matter. Good bye, dear; and mind you get rid of your headache, and all other pains as fast as you can."

That same evening Mrs. Forrest and Caroline were sitting with their work on either side of a small but cheerfully glowing fire, waiting the arrival of Philip Maranham. The tea things stood on the round table behind them; and on the warm hearth rug Philip's two dogs were stretched in luxurious slumber. It was altogether a very comfortable and happy looking group—giving an idea of that quiet domestic enjoyment, which does the restless heart real good to contemplate.

Both the ladies had been silent for some time, apparently engrossed with their own private reflections; but suddenly Mrs. Forrest raised her head, put down her work, and, looking kindly at Caroline, thus addressed her—

"My dear, I have been thinking of you for the last half hour. You have always been a little bit of a puzzle to me; and

now, in glancing back over the space of a month or two, I am quite penetrated with a sense of the rare amiability and patience you have invariably displayed. I feel grateful to you, my dear girl; indeed I do. Your goodness has touched me deeply, Caroline; though, until this moment, I have never even had the grace to thank you for it."

Miss Ashton had looked greatly surprised at the commencement of her companion's speech; and when it was ended, she said, in her quiet, gentle way—

"It is you, dearest Mrs. Forrest, who are, at present, a complete puzzle to me. I am really unconscious of ever having done a single thing to merit your encomiums, much less your gratitude. Do tell me what you mean."

"Why, my love, I cannot blind myself to the fact, that poor Philip, from the very day of his arrival, has been an unceasing torment to you. He worries you to death, I am sure; and yet you have all along

borne it—for my sake, I know—like an angel. I feel that his absence must have been the greatest possible relief to you; and yet, because the thought of his return fills me with rejoicing, you have forgotten every selfish consideration, to sympathize with the old woman's gladness. Then, too, what care you have bestowed on those dogs of his; which were, once at least, objects of absolute terror to you. There is not one in a thousand who would have taken them out daily, as you have done; and if Philip is not overpowered with gratitude, I shall be ashamed to own him for a nephew."

Caroline's countenance had varied a good deal while Mrs. Forrest was giving this explanation; but she did not look up from her work again, and only said, in reply—

"Pray, don't tell Mr. Maranham anything about the dogs. I like them, now, for their own sakes, pretty, faithful creatures! and, indeed, Mrs. Forrest, I

must entirely disclaim all the credit for amiability you are disposed to heap upon me. I feel quite sufficiently interested in your nephew to endure, without difficulty, his occasional caprices; and even were it otherwise, how could I better repay your constant kindness to me than by showing indulgence towards one who is so very dear to you?"

"Well, well, my love, I might have known that you would refuse to ascribe any merit to your own conduct, but I shall not feel less grateful on this account; and if Philip continues obstinately blind to such unexampled goodness, you must attribute it to the predominance of that one unfortunate passion which—though, happily, you know nothing of from experience—you must have heard and read of as the occasion of every folly and absurdity under the sun."

"Dear Mrs. Forrest, rest satisfied, I implore you, with the present position of affairs. Philip's gratitude would distress

and embarrass me—his indifference I can very well endure.”

Mrs. Forrest stretched out her hand, which Caroline pressed affectionately, but then let fall abruptly, as there came a sudden, impatient, and familiar ringing of the garden bell.

“Dear boy!” said the aunt, rising hastily, while a warm colour overspread her pale face and brow, “I hope Susan will not keep him waiting. No; there she runs. Caroline, my love, put the tea in now—he will be half famished after his journey.”

Miss Ashton quietly obeyed the order, and continued busy with the cups and plates even when Philip had come into the room and was smothering his delighted aunt with kisses, and replying to the vociferous welcomes of the suddenly awakened animals on the hearth-rug.

Last of all he turned to Caroline, and, taking the hand she frankly extended to him, said, in a gay though slightly re-

proachful voice, "I have been too well tutored to offend again, as I did on the night of my first arrival. But I do think, in consideration of my forbearance, that you might give me a little warmer welcome. You do not even say you are glad to see me."

"I am very glad indeed, to see you, Philip," said Caroline, with placid look and tone. "Let me make you a cup of tea; you must want something after such a long journey."

"Just the same model of propriety as ever," he replied, laughingly; "but we won't quarrel this first evening. I am so truly delighted to be back again, my best of aunts, and you both look so deliciously snug and comfortable here. Yes, give me a cup of warm tea, kind Miss Caroline Ashton; and you, old friends—to the dogs—keep quiet for a while; we'll have a famous run to-morrow to make up for lost time and for the laziness in which you have been indulging."

“Nay, Philip,” put in Mrs. Forrest, regardless of Caroline’s significant frowns, “your favourites have been duly cared for in your absence; and, thanks to that modest young lady beside you, they have never missed their daily walk.”

“Dear, good Carry!” said Philip, turning round, with an expression of pleased surprise on his countenance, and impetuously seizing Miss Ashton’s hands, “I never should have thought this of you. I did not deserve it. How can I prove my gratitude—my admiration of your generous and unselfish conduct?”

Caroline gently, but quickly, withdrew her hands from Philip’s grasp, and stooping to pat the dogs, who had again crouched on the hearth rug, said, carelessly,—

“Pray, give me credit for appreciating these nice intelligent creatures, rather than for any romantic kindness towards yourself. My conscience is tender on some points, and will not suffer me to accept applause which is not strictly my due.”

Philip looked, for a few seconds, vexed and disappointed at her coldness; but he soon recovered his animation, and began a long string of queries concerning the rectory and its inmates.

Caroline remained in the room till the tea-things were carried away; and then she quietly gathered together her working materials, and, without deeming any apology necessary, left the aunt and nephew alone for the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER IX.

“MY dear Philip, I must again remind you that Miss Ashton is suffering from a severe headache; which your restlessness is not calculated to improve. Our friends will not arrive one moment sooner for your really childish impatience. Do, my dear boy, take up a book and sit still.”

It was the evening after Philip's return home, and an hour or two before the rectory party was expected, that Mrs. Forrest thus addressed her nephew.

“I beg you ten thousand pardons, Carry,” he replied, stopping abruptly in his perambulations round the room. “But if you have a headache, why not take a turn in the garden? Come, let us go out together for half an hour.”

Caroline instantly laid aside the work

upon which she had been engaged; and, throwing a shawl over her shoulders, prepared to indulge the sudden whim of her ceaseless tormentor.

But Philip was not in one of his *wilfully* tormenting moods this evening. He appeared, indeed, to be basking in a state of internal sunshine, beneath whose genial rays all his elfish propensities were, for a while, lulled to rest, and the fascinations of his character rendered more than usually apparent. Caroline tried to rally from her own depression to enter into her companion's joyous mood; but, in spite of all her efforts, the head would continue to ache and the heart to give back such dreary echoes, that Philip was struck, at last, by her unwonted gloom; and, turning suddenly to look into the pale face at his side, he said, with amusing *naiveté*—

“Oh! Carry, I would give the world to see you as much in love as I am. Don't you think you could conjure up a little sentiment to please me?”

Miss Ashton put her hand abruptly to her forehead, so that Philip might have been mistaken in supposing that she blushed, as she replied—

“And, pray, who is to be the object of this impromptu and complaisant sentiment—the man in the moon, or any less ethereal and exalted hero?”

“Why can’t you make it Arthur Cressingham, now—surely he is a good-looking, clever, pleasant fellow enough for you? or, if you prefer the lackadaisical style, take Lawrence Singleton, who would save you the expense of a tutor for your children.”

“Thank you; but they neither of them suit. I think we must content ourselves with the man who carries the faggot, after all. Suppose, therefore, that your wish is accomplished, and that I am as madly in love as yourself—what is to come next?”

“Oh! then I should expect you to talk to me about your hopes and fears—to rise into sudden raptures—or to sink into fits of despondency, as I am constrained to do.

It would be so pleasant to compare notes occasionally ; and I should be so much surer of your perfect sympathy than I can be at present, knowing your heart to be as cold and as hard as granite."

"Well, then," said Caroline, faintly smiling, "let it be understood that I am in love—madly, desperately, hopelessly in love with the man in the moon, who, of course, does not return my unfortunate passion ; and is, in fact, in a state of blissful ignorance as to its very existence. You can easily picture my sufferings under such adverse circumstances ; and I am willing to confess, moreover, that I lament, day and night, having raised my presumptuous eyes to such a dizzy eminence. It is too late, however, to retract ; and my poor heart being irretrievably gone, I can but lament its loss, and try to do as well as I may without it."

"I would not be so patient, or so resigned," said Philip, eagerly. "Real love must be paid in its own coin ; nothing less

will content it. Oh, Caroline, you have spoken in jest; but let me tell you in earnest, that a love, such as *I* feel, must—*shall* win back love, sooner or later, to recompense it. There is a spirit stirring within me to-night, which bids me hope all things. Theresa does not care for me yet—that I know—but the strength and constancy of my devotion shall compel her to do so at length—this I feel. And then—Oh, Carry! I have such glorious visions of our future life—a life which love shall divest of every shadow—every cloud. That pure, bright angel will be mine—wholly mine; and I will guard her as a priceless jewel, and forbid any dark or evil thing to cross her shining path.”

Caroline had become very thoughtful while Philip spoke; and once a deep red flush had risen suddenly to her cheek, and she had stood still abruptly, as if some new and exciting idea had presented itself, at that moment, to her imagination. But, by the time her companion came to a pause,

her quiet composure had returned, and she was ready with her sensible and rational observations on his somewhat visionary ramblings.

“But, Philip, I thought your aunt had convinced you that the united probable incomes of Miss Berrington and yourself would be insufficient to maintain you in the position to which you have both been accustomed. Is it not folly, under these circumstances, to persist in trying to win her affections?”

“Most wise and prudent Carry, hear now the whole matter. My very dear and respected aunt held a long conversation with me, last evening, on this very subject; and she has invited Theresa and myself—supposing we are married—to reside with her as long as it may be agreeable to ourselves. She declares this arrangement would be a source of the greatest happiness to her. I hope, dear Carry, *you* would not dislike it; but in case of Theresa not consenting to become

my aunt's guest, this jewel of a woman insists upon adding from her own resources—which she assures me are ample—enough to make us up an income. She loves Theresa dearly; and I love *her* ten times more, because she does so."

Caroline had listened with the deepest attention to Philip's explanation; but, for once, she had no remark of any kind to make on what he had been saying. Fortunately, he was too much absorbed with his own glowing fancies to notice her unusual silence; and when, at length, she did speak, he attributed the strange depression of her tone to that tiresome headache which had made her so dull all the afternoon. And she merely said—

"I sincerely wish you every happiness, Philip; and if such is only to be insured by your union with Theresa, Heaven send that your own and your aunt's wishes on this subject be speedily realized."

"Thank you, dear Carry—thank you," he cried, seizing her hand with his usual

impetuosity. "I know you are as good-hearted a girl as ever lived; and if you hadn't been so deucedly cold in the beginning — Ah! there they all are, I declare. Excuse me, Carry; I *must* be the first to welcome Theresa."

* * * * *

The widow's little party went off admirably. Every individual composing it—with the exception of poor Caroline, whose head grew worse rather than better—was in excellent spirits, and disposed to make any amount of exertion for the general entertainment. Mrs. Darlington was particularly delightful; and the quiet hostess felt unbounded gratitude towards this lively lady for the very active part she took in amusing that large division of her guests with which Philip appeared to think he had nothing in the world to do.

Caroline observed that Theresa did not keep her promise of being cold and distant to Philip; and knowing nothing of that full internal contentment which made it

almost impossible for the former to be otherwise than amiable to the whole human race, Miss Ashton naturally concluded that her little friend was less steadfast in her first attachment than she had hitherto given her credit for being.

And, in quietly considering the whole matter, Caroline began to think that the new idea suggested that evening by Philip's confidences might, in the end, become a reality—that, impossible as till now it had appeared to her, Philip Maranham and Theresa Berrington might, in the process of time, be one in heart and name, and forget that there had ever been an hour in which mutual love had not existed between them.

And why should it not be so? Mrs. Forrest was tenderly attached to Theresa, and she had agreed to provide the young couple a home, and to make any personal sacrifice to avert from them the cares attendant upon an imprudent marriage. Of the strength and fervour of Philip's

affection there could be no shadow of a doubt; and would not Theresa, with her tender, clinging nature, have a far, far better chance of happiness in the quiet, guarded sphere that would be thus marked out for her, than amidst the strange, uncongenial circles to which an union with Lawrence Singleton would necessarily introduce her?

To all these questions Caroline's judgment had only one answer to give; but it was hard to abandon, in a moment, the cherished scheme of so many months—to put the interesting—because incomprehensible—Lawrence Singleton quite aside, and unite the two interests which had hitherto been so carefully kept asunder.

It was so hard, indeed, that Miss Ashton resolved yet to wait and watch a little while before she made any change in the knots of the web she was weaving.

In the meantime, Mrs. Forrest had her visions and her fancies too. Firmly persuaded, by her nephew's eloquence, that

his love for Theresa was the one passion of a lifetime, which, if disappointed, would embitter all his days, she now desired nothing so earnestly as that his devotion should be reciprocated by the object of it. That anybody could long be indifferent to Philip appeared to his adoring aunt a moral impossibility ; and the only thing of which she sought now to be persuaded was, that Theresa had not been seriously captivated by the handsome and insinuating Arthur Cressingham.

On the present occasion this gentleman devoted himself almost exclusively to Mrs. Darlington, who bestowed upon him as many smiles and anecdotes as she could spare from the party collectively. Theresa's gaiety certainly did not diminish from this desertion of her presumed admirer ; and Mrs. Forrest, listening to her little favourite's joyous voice as she sang some animated ballad, looking at Philip's sparkling countenance as, un-reproved, he leant against the piano and

gazed rapturously into the singer's lovely face, thought she might reasonably indulge a hope of seeing her nearest and dearest in possession of the desire of his heart, and of having her own declining days brightened by the companionship of the two she most loved on earth.

Nor must it be supposed that the rector and his estimable wife were quite blind to what was passing around them. Mrs. Berrington, like a prudent matron, had already communicated to her husband the suspicions she entertained respecting Theresa's preference for Lawrence Singleton; and loving their daughter as they did, they both agreed that such an attachment was the very last thing they could desire. Not that either of them was entirely free from that natural parental weakness which rejoices in a child's worldly exaltation, but they had the common sense to foresee the manner in which their darling would be received—if received at all—into a family like the Singletons; and

they, therefore, said and felt that Philip Maranham would be a far more desirable husband for the rector of Elderton's daughter.

Theresa little dreamt—as she folded ever closer and closer to her heart her own precious secret—of the various hopes and fears of which she was this evening the principal object. In *her* future there was but one goal—in her sky but one star—and over all her spirit a delicious repose had settled, which she fondly thought would be as changeless as it was sweet.

The rectory party walked home by the light of a glorious moon ; and while Theresa, resting on her father's arm, was indulging rapturous anticipations of the time when her evening walks with Lawrence should be renewed, and possess a tenfold zest from the understanding at length established between them, Philip Maranham was piling up stone after stone of his radiant castles, through the windows of which he

looked out upon an enchanted world, where love reigned omnipotent and sorrow was a thing unknown.

And Caroline Ashton sat in her quiet room, watching the stars fade from the clear, cold sky—thinking of the peaceful days at Fairfield House—of the old lime avenue—of the friends who, probably, still wandered there, to watch the bright sunsets and communicate to each other their innocent secrets; but she wished, now, from her inmost heart, that fate had never removed her from those tranquil scenes.

CHAPTER X.

DURING the short time that had yet to intervene before Mrs. Darlington left Elderton, there was a constant and very friendly intercourse kept up between the inmates of the rectory and of the cottage. Scarcely an evening passed without some of them meeting at one of the above named houses ; and thus Philip's passion received every opportunity of nourishment, and increased daily in strength and intensity.

But, lest Theresa should be too severely censured for the tacit encouragement she certainly gave, it must be observed that his manner towards her was gradually undergoing a change ; and, as his attachment deepened inwardly, the outward demonstrations of it—which had, at first,

been almost obtrusively marked—sensibly diminished, and were, indeed, fast subsiding into that subdued and attentive watchfulness of her every look and movement, which real love almost invariably inspires.

Had Theresa's own heart not been so entirely pre-occupied, it is probable that she would have understood and appreciated this change of conduct, as those around her had no difficulty in doing; but, as it was, she felt nothing but a vague sensation of relief at being freed from attentions which could never be acceptable to her; and, out of simple gratitude, she began to treat Philip with a gentle kindness, that not only deceived the enraptured object of it, but caused the anxious lookers on to come to the conclusion that her heart was yielding, at length, before the persevering seige to which it had been exposed.

Even Caroline, though the last to doubt Theresa's constancy to her first love, fell in, after a while, with the general opinion,

and believed that a very short time would see Miss Berrington and Mr. Maranham engaged lovers.

Affairs were in this state when Mrs. Darlington's visit to the rectory arrived at its termination; and the gay widow—whose gaiety was almost quenched for the moment, at the thoughts of leaving so many kind and esteemed friends—went to make her adieus to Mrs. Forrest and Caroline.

The latter, who was sincerely grieved at losing such a pleasant addition to their small circle, accompanied Mrs. Darlington from the parlour to the garden gate; and, as they were shaking hands for the last time, the widow said, with unusual seriousness,—

“Mind you look after Tessie, my dear Miss Ashton. I know you to be her true friend; and, between ourselves, I suspect she has secrets that she tells to no one.”

“I thought,” replied Caroline, eagerly, “that you were amongst those who believed

her to be inclining favourably towards Philip Maranham, Has anything occurred to make you change your opinion?"

"Why, to tell you the truth," resumed the widow, in a confidential tone, "I never very cordially subscribed to the general impression on this subject; but, like my aunt and uncle, I think anything would be preferable to her marrying that whimsical, romantic bookworm, she took such a singular fancy to; and, therefore, I was ready with them to catch at the shadow of a hope that she was forgetting him for another. But, in the meantime, I have kept up a pretty sharp watch over my charming little cousin; and I want to know what is the meaning of the excessive agitation she betrays every morning at the time the post usually arrives, and why she invariably throws down a cup and saucer, or swallows her tea in a boiling state, or performs some other absurdity at the very moment when the letters are brought in?"

"It is suspicious, certainly," said Caro-

line : “ but, has Mr. Singleton not written yet to your uncle ?”

“ Only a few lines, I believe, to announce his safe arrival, and not a word about the time of his probable return.”

“ And you really believe that Theresa is anxious concerning this ?”

“ My dear Miss Ashton, I scarcely know what to believe ; but I do wish Mr. Maranham would propose at once, and put the matter beyond a doubt.”

“ He will not do that,” said Caroline, shaking her head ; and, in her turn, speaking low and earnestly,—“ This love has *quite* sobered down the impetuosity of his character, and given him the patience of a martyr. He will wait and wait, though it were for years, till he is assured of not meeting a repulse—of not being driven altogether from the paradise he now enjoys.”

Caroline smiled faintly as she uttered the last sentence ; and Mrs. Darlington noticed and wondered at the swift flush

that crossed her pale cheek at the same time; but, engrossed in the subject under discussion, the widow added, immediately,—

“Let him have a care that it does not turn out to have been a fool’s paradise. But I am keeping you shivering in the cold, poor girl—so, once more, good bye; and may all happiness attend you till fate brings us together again.”

“Good bye, then, if it must be so,” said Caroline, regretfully; “and depend on my doing everything in my power to ward off trouble and sorrow from our dear Theresa.”

“That girl is one in a thousand,” said the widow to herself, as she walked, thoughtfully, down the lane towards the rectory. “I wonder none of these boys have fallen in love with her; but, oh beauty, beauty, beauty!—thou art, indeed, the conqueror of the world.”

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The iron hand of winter had swept away

every trace even of her pale and melancholy herald autumn, and the snow was lying thickly on the ground, when, one morning, at an early hour, Caroline Ashton, protected by a furred mantle, and looking, in spite of the cold breeze that was blowing upon her cheek, far less fresh and blooming than when she had arrived at Elderton, set forth on a visit to the rectory.

Theresa was ill, and had been so for some time; so ill, indeed, that all excitement was forbidden her—and even Caroline had not been admitted to see her friend during the last three weeks. Mrs. Berrington said the foolish child had taken cold by working too late in the garden; the rector attributed the illness to the peculiar unhealthiness of the season, from which almost everybody in the village had suffered, more or less; and the sage village leech agreed with both parents alternately, and assured them it had been an “uncommonly tough case.”

It will readily be believed that the

cottage party had warmly sympathized with their friends at the rectory during the progress of the disease; and it will, doubtless, be superfluous to detail the number of journeys the alarmed and wretched Philip undertook to the county town, in search of delicacies for the beloved invalid—delicacies, however, which he would always have offered in his aunt's name, lest there should be any hesitation in accepting them.

As for poor Caroline, she had been, as usual, a martyr to his distress and inquietude; and although she was sincerely grieved, on her own account, at being denied the privilege of visiting Theresa, Philip persisted in imputing the whole blame of it to her, and threw out hourly hints respecting the heartlessness and indifference of women to each other.

To say that Caroline's patience was not severely tried by this cruel injustice would be to represent her as something more than human; but it is only fair to add, that

she seldom made any open complaints—grieving, if she did grieve, in the solitude of her own room.

But, there came, at length, a message to the cottage, to the effect that Theresa was sufficiently recovered to receive Mrs. Forrest or Miss Ashton whenever they liked to go; and although Philip had ridden over that morning to Oxendean, and, consequently, could not be a witness of her zeal, Caroline lost not a moment, after the delivery of the message, in equipping herself for the long delayed visit.

Mrs. Berrington, who had anticipated this prompt acceptance of the invitation, was ready in the parlour to welcome her daughter's friend; and, after a few kind words of greeting, she bade the latter go up stairs, where the invalid was anxiously expecting her appearance.

Hastily availing herself of this permission, Miss Ashton opened the bed-room door softly, and went in.

Theresa was sitting wrapped in shawls, and supported by pillows in an easy chair, beside a blazing fire. She had neither book nor work near her; and her eyes seemed fixed, with a mournful earnestness, upon the brightly-glowing embers in the grate before her. Caroline was shocked and startled at the alteration a few weeks had effected in her personal appearance; but she had been exhorted to keep up the spirits of her poor little friend; so, after fondly kissing the wasted cheek, she took a chair that was standing on the opposite side of the fire-place, and said only—

“How do you feel to-day, Theresa?”

“Oh, I am much better,” was the prompt reply, though in a tone that belied the words; “and to-morrow I hope they will let me leave this weary, weary room. Oh, Caroline! I am so tired of stillness, and of my own stupid thoughts.”

“Have you not been allowed to read, dear Theresa?” said her friend.

“Oh, yes; but nothing interested me;

and I could not fix my attention for long together; and you know I never was, at the best, so fond of reading as you are."

"Well, now that you are getting better, we must all unite in amusing you. They say we are going to have a hard, sharp frost; and, if so, you may be able to get out a little."

"It seems very cold to-day, Caroline. You look half frozen, and it appears to me that you are thinner than you were."

"Perhaps I may be, dear; but I am quite well, I believe—only one can't get much exercise this sort of weather. Mrs. Forrest bade me say a thousand kind things to you from her. She has been most anxious about you since your illness began."

"Dear, good Mrs. Forrest! How glad I shall be to see her again!" said Theresa, feelingly. "It seems months, instead of weeks, that I have been confined to this dreary room."

Thus far the conversation had proceeded

without much difficulty—the commonplace observations inseparable from a meeting like the present had suggested themselves readily enough to the minds and the tongues of each. But here they came to a pause, both feeling instinctively that any further attempts at veiling their deeper sentiments would be as ridiculous as it must be unsuccessful.

So Caroline, drawing her chair a little nearer to the fire, sat gazing mournfully—and with a swelling heart, into the pale, wistful countenance of her silent companion, resolved not to ask her confidence, but ready and even anxious to receive it.

And slowly into poor Theresa's eyes large tears began to gather, shining there first for a few brief seconds, and then rolling like raindrops down her colourless cheeks. All disguise was over now; and stretching out her small, burning hand to Caroline, she said, in a voice that though touchingly quiet in itself, sobs were hastening to choke—

“I could endure anything but suspense; but this it is that is killing me. I have no strength of mind to bear up against it; and this constant aching of the heart—real aching, Caroline, for I feel it here night and day”—and she pressed her hand tightly to her side—“will soon bring me to the grave. I know it will; and only that I am quite unfit to die, I should be glad to think so—for what have I to live for now?”

Caroline heard her patiently to the end; and then leaning slightly forward, and speaking in a low, earnest tone, she said—

“Theresa, it is so long since you have opened your heart to me, that I hardly know whether I rightly understand to what your words refer; but tell me distinctly what it is that distresses you, and I will assist you to the utmost of my power.”

“Oh! Caroline, what power can you, or any other human being have in the matter? He has never written since those first few lines; he has forgotten me; he will never

come back—perhaps he is even now amusing his titled friends with an account of the presumptuous love of his tutor's daughter."

"Then it is, indeed, Lawrence Singleton to whom you are still attached, Theresa?" said Caroline, shading her face for a few moments, and speaking with a rapidity unusual to her.

The sudden opening of Theresa's blue eyes to their widest extent, and the expression of pure astonishment painted on her countenance, would have been almost ludicrous at any other time. But Caroline did not smile now—she only said, in answer to her friend's unmistakeable look,—

"Forgive me, dear, for doubting your constancy; but, indeed, it has long been the general opinion, and, I may add, the general hope, that you were beginning to receive favourably the attentions of another gentleman."

A quick, indignant flush sprang into

Theresa's cheek, and she replied, somewhat impatiently,—

“I really am not aware of having been the object of any such attentions lately. I am sure your Mr. Maranham has been only commonly polite to me for a long time past; and as for Arthur Cressingham, you know he scarcely spoke to me for, at least, a week before he went away.”

“I was not alluding to Arthur Cressingham,” said Caroline, rather shortly; but she did not think it necessary to explain of whom she *had* spoken, or to add her own conviction that Philip's cessation from outward homage was only the result of a more deep and settled attachment.

Neither did Theresa seem disposed to continue the subject, as far as Mr. Maranham was concerned; but, after a rather embarrassed pause, she resumed, hastily—

“Can you at all account for this strange silence, Caroline? Do you think it likely his mother may have heard anything, and have forbidden him to hold farther corres-

pondence with the family ; or—or, in short, can you give me the least comfort on the subject ?”

“I am a bad guesser, Theresa ; especially when my knowledge is so limited of the thing to be guessed about. May I inquire whether any definite engagement existed between you and Mr. Singleton before he left Elderton ?”

Theresa blushed deeply, as she replied—
“It is from no want of confidence in you, Caroline, that I have not told you more. There are some things which, even to our dearest friends, we cannot speak of familiarly. Thus much though, I had intended now to say—that I had every reason to believe Lawrence loved me, and wished me to consider myself bound to him. But, whether it were so or not, I shall never, never marry any body else.”

“Not even if you should never hear from him again, Theresa ?”

“Certainly not ; for there is no one equal to him in the world ; and having

once loved Lawrence Singleton, it is not very likely that I could give my heart to an inferior person."

Caroline had some difficulty in suppressing a smile at the *naïve* confidence with which Theresa asserted her lover's superiority to the whole human race, especially when it was remembered that the poor child had never come in immediate contact with half a dozen of the male sex besides Lawrence and Arthur Cressingham. But Miss Ashton was not without some respect for the feeling that had inspired this bold assertion ; so, refraining from any dissenting opinion, and observing that the time Mrs. Berrington had allotted her was already expired, she rose to embrace Theresa, and take her leave."

"You will come to the cottage as soon as you can get out?" Caroline said, as she opened the door; and Theresa replying that she hoped to do so in a day or two, the friends parted.

Miss Ashton had abundance of food for

meditation as she walked slowly—notwithstanding the severe cold—in the direction of her own home. But although her interest in Theresa was as warm and true as it had ever been, it was not with her nor with Lawrence Singleton that Caroline's thoughts were engrossed at present. These two had, at any rate, mutual affection to support them, and they might be happy yet; but there was one to whom disappointment of the bitterest kind seemed now inevitable—one whose deep and generous love must now be driven back, to rankle, perhaps for ever, in his wounded heart—one for whom the world would henceforth have no sunshine, and life no hope.

It was of him that Caroline thought—for him that Caroline wept.

CHAPTER XI.

It was about four days after this, during which time Mrs. Forrest had been once to the rectory to see Theresa, that the latter, on a clear, frosty morning, made her first appearance at the cottage.

Philip and his aunt were together in the little parlour when she was suddenly ushered in; and though the former had been told to expect a great change in the object of his adoration, he had never been able to realize to himself the dim eye, and the wasted cheek, and the shrunken form of that bright Theresa, who had ever seemed to him more like a spirit of youth and health, than a feeble child of this perishing world.

When therefore she suddenly stood before him—pale, wan, and with scarce a vestige

of her former self remaining—his emotion was so powerful that he could not utter a word of welcome or of greeting. He got up and clasped both her hands in his own, and gazed into the beloved face with an expression in which pity, tenderness, and the most passionate devotion were so unmistakeably blended, that even Theresa, sceptical as she had hitherto been on the subject of his attachment, could no longer doubt either its sincerity or its depth. Her nerves, already shaken and excited by the effort of leaving home, were unable to endure that yearning regard which revealed so much that it was grief to her to learn; and, turning hastily from Philip, with swimming eyes, she threw herself into Mrs. Forrest's arms and sobbed aloud.

The latter held her there silently for a few minutes, and then, as Theresa's agitation began to subside, the widow, thinking she could not do a greater kindness to the young people than leave them at such a moment alone, was on the point of rising

for this purpose, when Theresa, suddenly guessing her intention and its object, started up abruptly herself, and, saying she would go now and find Miss Ashton, ran hastily from the room.

Caroline was writing when her friend went in; and she was going to push her desk aside, when Theresa said, quickly—"Oh, don't leave off on my account. I could not talk just yet. I am tired and nervous—and cross, I think. Continue your occupation, Caroline, and I will examine your books and rest myself till you have done."

Miss Ashton would fain have enquired what had taken place down stairs to occasion this mysterious nervousness; but guessing that any curiosity on the subject would embarrass and annoy her companion, she prudently returned to her writing, and left Theresa to do what she liked best.

For a while the latter contented herself with sitting by the fire, and making a

pretence of warming her frozen feet; but, growing weary of remaining still, she soon got up, and began walking restlessly about the room—now taking from its shelf some book that she had no thought of reading, now disarranging the perfect order of Caroline's various little knick-knacks, and now gazing listlessly from the window at the frost-covered trees and the cold, cheerless-looking garden in which they stood.

Her wanderings were abruptly terminated by Caroline saying, in her calm, quiet voice—"Come here for a minute, Theresa."

Theresa, in momentary astonishment, obeyed the summons; and Miss Ashton, pointing to a letter she had just finished, desired her guest to read it. Thus it ran:—

"Theresa Cottage,

"Elderton,

"January 6th, 18—.

"My dear Lady Singleton,—

"If you have really forgiven my unceremonious rejection of your former

kind invitation, may I venture to hope that you will let me come and pass a few weeks with you now? I have ascertained, from the *Morning Post*, which occasionally finds its way to our quiet village, that you are, at present, staying at Burnham Park; also, that your Christmas guests have just left you. Knowing my aversion to general society, you will not be surprised at my choosing this particular time for offering to visit you; but should I be presuming too much on your past kindness, in asking you to receive me, pray do not scruple to tell me I am not wanted.

“With best regards and compliments of the season,

“Believe me, my dear Lady Singleton,

“Very truly yours,

“CAROLINE ASHTON.”

“Did I not say I would help you if I could?” inquired Caroline, smilingly, as Theresa laid down the letter and regarded the writer of it with a look of blank amazement.

“But, dear Caroline” —

“My love, we will encourage neither *but*s nor *ifs* in the matter. Leave everything to me. I have already forewarned Mrs. Forrest of my intention; and she is, I assure you, as unsuspicious as one of the babes of the wood. I really require change of air. Did you not tell me, the other day, that I had grown thin? And I promise you, Theresa, that I will not stay more than a month, at farthest.”

Theresa was all the while pressing her fingers tightly against her eyelids, to try and keep in the foolish tears that were again gathering there; and as Caroline paused for an answer she repeated, in an indescribably pathetic tone—

“A month! another whole month, Caroline!”

“But I shall write to you, dear child, many times, I dare say, within that period. Your suspense shall not be of long duration now, Theresa, if Lady Singleton lets me go to her.”

“ But what can you do, Caroline, without betraying my weakness to Lawrence? and I could far rather die than he should know I am breaking my heart about him—especially as it is possible he may have ceased altogether to care for me.”

“ Possible, but not probable, Theresa. However, have no fears about your secret, dear. My faith to you in this matter having stood the severest test to which it can ever be exposed, is not likely to fail before any minor ones. And rest assured I shall not prove such a bungler in your affairs as you seem to apprehend.”

Theresa was partially satisfied and abundantly grateful to her friend for the exertions she was making in her behalf. She forgot, at the time, to inquire what was the test to which Caroline alluded; but remembering it when she reached home, and the earnest manner in which it had been spoken of, she puzzled herself considerably in wondering what it could possibly be.

At length a strange and startling idea

occurred to her, and, burying her face in her hands, Theresa remained for a few minutes in profound meditation; and as this was a habit to which—except on one subject—the rector's daughter was not much addicted, the mental exercise brought forth a result.

That evening, as Theresa and her mother took their seats, after dinner, by the side of their comfortable parlour fire, the former said, abruptly—

“Mamma, do you think Isabel would like me to go and stay a little while with her now?”

“My dear Tessie,” responded Mrs. Berrington, in a tone of considerable surprise, as she withdrew her fingers from their near proximity to the glowing log in the grate, and sat upright to look at her daughter—“my dear Tessie, do you really mean that you should like to go?”

“If you and papa have no objection, I think I should. I do not feel so strong as I did; and I am sure the change would benefit me.”

“But, my dearest love, you could not travel to London alone; and I fear your father would be unable to spare the time to take you just now. I hope, Tessie, darling, you do not feel so very weak.”

This last sentence was spoken in a tone of such anxious tenderness that Theresa hastened to allay her mother's fears, and to assure her that there was nothing serious the matter with her. In conclusion she added, with some embarrassment—

“I believe Caroline Ashton has some idea of paying a visit to her mother's friend, Lady Singleton; and in this case she could be my travelling companion, as I fancy Burnham Park is on the other side of London.”

Mrs. Berrington looked surprised.

“It seems, then, that you have settled this double flight from Elderton between yourselves already. Was that this morning's work, Tessie dear?”

“No, mamma; nor does Caroline know a word about my part of the plan. I have only thought of it since I came home.”

“Well, my love, I will speak to papa by and bye. You are certainly much altered from this illness; and if I was sure it would do you good, I should be the first to urge your going.”

“And mamma, if I am to go, let this be an excuse for my remaining as much as possible with you till the time arrives. I do not wish to throw myself in the way of—of Philip Maranham.”

Again Mrs. Berrington slightly elevated her eyebrows, and turned from the fire to gaze into her daughter's face. But it is probable that what she read there did not encourage her to be inquisitive at present; for she only sighed quietly, and said—

“Come and kiss me, my Tessie.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE estate called Burnham Park, consisted of a handsomely built, modern country house, several acres of tastefully planted gardens and shrubberies, and a park of about twelve miles in extent, well stocked with deer and boasting more picturesque rides and drives than any in the same county.

Lady Singleton had been somewhat disappointed, at first, that the beautiful place to which her husband had so unexpectedly succeeded was not of that ancient and venerable order of architecture which seems to bespeak a long time of aristocratic owners; but finding, on inquiry, that such a delightful relic of the olden times had really occupied the site of the present dwelling house till within

the last twenty years, when it had been pulled down to make room for its more ornamental successor, she became partially reconciled to the misfortune, and entertained her numerous country visitors with pathetic lamentations concerning the exceeding vulgarity of modern taste and the inestimable privilege of living in a house with ivied towers and turrets, even though its possession should be disputed with owls, bats, and hobgoblins.

As everybody knew that poor Lady Singleton came from an obscure London lodging, her opinion on the subject was not received as gospel; nevertheless, her friends smiled and applauded by the hour together, whether this or any other topic happened to be selected by the wealthy and agreeable mistress of Burnham Park, and twelve thousand a year.

But time, which blends gracefully the most graceless things, enabled Janet Singleton to bear the weight of her new honours, pretty much as though she had been born

to them, and in the substantial comforts of her beautiful country home, she soon ceased to lament its defunct predecessor, or to talk pathetically of ruined walls and ivied turrets.

The library at Burnham Park was a very charming room, and it had been built and fitted up with so much attention to warmth and comfort that during the winter months the present family made use of it for a breakfast parlour, and generally sat there during the remainder of the morning. When the house was full of company, this arrangement had been found particularly convenient, and, now that they were alone again, none of them felt disposed to move into a smaller apartment. The large bay windows looked upon an exquisitely tended plot of ground, called "the lady's flower garden," whose green, mossy banks, declining gently on one side, rose with a less gradual slope on the other, and terminated in a thick plantation of every graceful garden tree

that nature has invented and that money could procure.

On a cold morning in January, a young man, without any pretensions to personal comeliness, but with an expression of thoughtfulness on his rather remarkable countenance, stood alone by one of these attractive windows, not gazing at the prospect which even now was far from wanting in beauty, but peering into a moth-eaten, dingy looking book that he held in both his hands.

He had remained there, quite absorbed in his occupation, and apparently unconscious of the cold, for nearly half an hour, when the door suddenly opened and a tall, fair woman, of about forty years of age, slightly over-dressed, and having on her arm a small key basket of very elegant manufacture, came into the room, and sat down in an easy chair that was placed close to the roaring fire.

She was not looking precisely ill-tempered or unamiable, but still there was

an expression on her face which might have suggested to the thoughtful observer, either that she had some secret cause of dissatisfaction on her mind, or that she was endowed with that unfortunate appreciation of the wintry atmosphere which occasionally disturbs the equanimity of the fragile portion of creation, and renders "a bitter morning" the occasion of "a bitter mood."

Be this as it may, the fair mistress of Burnham Park certainly did not appear to derive any soothing influences from the warmth she courted so assiduously, for, after toasting her fingers and toes during full ten minutes, she suddenly exclaimed in a decidedly querulous tone, and without looking round—

"Do, for pity's sake, come to breakfast, Lawrence. If that book you have got now was not too dirty for me to touch, I would burn it before your eyes. Talk about marrying, indeed; why you ought to get a dispensation from the Ecclesias-

tical Court to enable you to marry one of those old book stalls that you used to prowl about so in London. I am sure no other wife will ever suit you."

Now as Janet Singleton had an idea that she had said a remarkably clever thing, and as clever things did not occur to her every day, she felt decidedly better after it had been uttered, and as Lawrence did not immediately reply, she added in a much blander tone—

"My dear boy, do come and make the breakfast for me. My poor fingers are literally frozen."

Thus entreated, Lawrence laid aside his book and moved slowly towards the table, though there was no possibility of mistaking that he would have preferred being left to read in peace, with the privilege of eating and drinking when nature inclined him to do so.

Lady Singleton now looked up at her son and smiled.

"You oddity of all oddities!" she said,

cheerfully, "I never *will* believe that your little rustic Dulcinea can have fallen in love with that monk-like face of yours. And how you contrived to whisper soft nothings into any female ear is, and must ever be, a matter of intense curiosity to your poor mother, who has only had the advantage of seeing you in your very sober moments."

Lawrence did not seem to consider himself bound in any way to applaud his parent's witticisms; but, although they excited no shadow of a smile, they failed equally in ruffling the perfect serenity of his broad majestic forehead, which looked as if it could not even bend to take cognizance of so slight a thing.

He made the coffee, however, and began to eat his own breakfast in silence, while Lady Singleton, albeit gifted with a very excellent appetite, gazed every now and then with admiring pride at her talented and eccentric son, and thought he might well aspire to mate with the richest and noblest in the land.

Suddenly Lawrence looked up from his cup, and, directing his eyes towards his companion, said quietly—

“You wrote that letter to Dr. Berrington, of course, mother?”

“My dearest Lawrence, how you *do* startle one with your abrupt and imperative questions. Upon my word I cannot at this moment recall the particular letter to which you refer; but I have no doubt it is all right. Let us finish our breakfast now, and have these things cleared away.”

This was said hastily and with a look of embarrassment, which, probably, did not escape the son's notice, for he replied immediately—

“I never knew your memory defective, mother; and this matter is one of importance to me. It is now more than a fortnight ago that it was agreed between us that you were to write to Dr. Berrington, on the subject of my remaining here so much longer than I anticipated doing. You will oblige me greatly, mother, by

stating frankly whether such a letter has been written or not."

There was much filial deference mingled with quiet firmness expressed in the son's voice and manner, and turning again to the fire that she might avoid meeting his eye, Lady Singleton answered with an affectation of carelessness—

"Well, really, Lawrence, I fear I must plead guilty, in spite of the compliment you pay to my memory. I have had so many things to think about lately, but I will write to-day, if you like."

"Thank you, but it will now be necessary for me to do it myself," said Lawrence, in a tone that convinced his mother he was perfectly aware of her omission having been intentional. "And as my father will be home next week, I shall at the same time fix the day for my return to Elderton."

"I hate the very name of that place," exclaimed Janet, passionately. "I always said what would come of your going to live

in a romantic parsonage, where there was an apple-cheeked, designing minx of a girl, trained by her vulgar parents to catch the first rich man who should fall in her way."

"I thought, mother," said Lawrence, smiling for the first time, "that you told me Mrs. Ashton had suggested this brilliant idea to you, and that you had refused altogether to entertain it, on the grounds of my supposed insensibility to female attractions."

"Well, well, what does it signify who thought of it first? I believe Lilla did attempt to warn me on this subject. She read the character of that odious, little *intrigante* at a glance."

Lawrence appeared to enjoy the last observation amazingly. He leant his forehead on his clasped hands, and was evidently indulging in one of those quiet, inward laughs which are so peculiarly irritating to the exciter of them. In a few minutes he looked up again, and said—

“Dear mother, let us be wise, and avoid any further discussion of a matter already disposed of by mutual agreement—or, perhaps *disagreement* is the more correct word. I will hold religiously to my promise of not marrying Theresa Berrington without your consent; but, as I never intend taking any other wife, I am quite sure this consent will be given in the end; and I have an admirable fund of patience to sustain me in the meantime. Here comes the letter bag.”

“You have an admirable fund of obstinacy at any rate,” said Janet, peevishly—“but pass the bag this way. You know I like to have the opening of it myself.”

There were no letters for Lawrence; but he sat quietly in his place, while Lady Singleton ran her eye quickly over some half-dozen scented billets from gossiping female correspondents. Nor did he express the least interest or curiosity when she suddenly let fall from her hands one that appeared shorter than the rest, and ex-

claimed, in a tone of extraordinary animation—

“ Well, I never heard of such a thing in my life! What can it mean? I declare I’m more puzzled than I ever was in the whole course of my existence.”

Lawrence poured out another cup of coffee, and then stamped the delicate pink salt with his signet ring.

“ Lawrence, what *do* you think?” she said, at last, knowing that he would disdain making any inquiries concerning the the cause of her excitement.

“ I think, mother, that you are impatient to communicate some intelligence contained in that letter, and that, having no one else at hand, you wish me to listen to it.”

“ Provoking boy! as if you were above all the weaknesses of humanity. But I know better; and it is to please you, not myself, that I impart to you the news I have just received. And mind, you cannot run away from home at present, be-

cause—what do you guess now?—because Caroline Ashton, that nice, sensible, clever creature, has proposed coming to stay with me for several weeks.”

“I am glad of it,” said Lawrence warmly, “for she is, as you observe, particularly nice, sensible, and clever. You could not have a more charming companion, mother.”

“Well, I declare now, men *are* the most inconsistent, incomprehensible, contradictory animals on the face of the earth. Why in nature, Lawrence, could you not have left that saucy chit you call Theresa (but which I don’t believe for a moment is her real name), to make dump-lings in her mother’s kitchen, and turned your attention to Caroline Ashton, whom it seems you know well enough to appreciate.”

“Dear mother, I am sure it would have been labour thrown away; besides, I have the weakness—being such an ugly dog myself—to possess a keen taste for beauty;

and Miss Berrington, whom you have cruelly robbed of her pretty Christian name, is lovely as the morning star, and pure as the meadow dew before a single ray of sunlight has touched its early freshness."

Lawrence had said this with a half comic seriousness, which, while redeeming it from sentimentality, left no doubt on the mind that he really felt every word of it; and Lady Singleton, with an impatient exclamation, gathered all her letters together and left the room to confide her troubles and annoyances to the attentive ear of her confidential waiting woman.

It was a habit she had contracted during her days of poverty and seclusion, and which she was too weak and irresolute to abandon now, particularly in the absence of those complaisant female friends who, in consideration of many favours past and future, were willing, during their stay at Burnham Park, to abandon the cherished privilege of womanhood, and

subside into the quiet character of listeners to Janet Singleton's misfortunes.

Lawrence sat down, on his mother's departure, to write to Dr. Berrington, but as he forgot at the time to send it to the post, and only remembered this omission several days later, it did not reach Elderton till a few hours after Theresa had commenced her journey northward.

CHAPTER XIII.

“IT is now half-past six, my dear,” said Sir James Singleton to his wife, as he suddenly ceased pacing up and down the large drawing-room and came and stood on the hearth-rug beside her.

It was the evening Miss Ashton was to arrive; and Lady Singleton replied, in a firm tone—

“I wait for our guest, Sir James. If you are hungry you can ring, and order them to cut you a sandwich.”

“Thank you; but you know I never spoil my dinner even by a luncheon. You ladies have a great advantage over us in this respect.”

The baronet spoke with perfect good humour; but his companion thought fit to answer rather sharply,—

“Oh, if you mean that for *me*, I assure you I scarcely tasted luncheon to-day, and I shall be quite as glad of my dinner as yourself; but, if I were literally fainting, I would not have it served before Miss Ashton arrives. She would think we had been brought up among the Hottentots.”

Sir James smiled and resumed his solitary walk. He was a sensible man; and though quite capable of enjoying a good dinner, he enjoyed domestic peace a very great deal more, and would have sacrificed the first to the last any day, or every day, if there had been a “needs be” in the case. Presently Janet said—

“I wonder whether Lawrence is at home. I should really be seriously displeased with him if he were to absent himself the very day of Miss Ashton’s arrival.”

“What does it matter,” observed Sir James, thoughtlessly. “I suppose the young lady knows that your son is as good as an engaged man, or she would not have volunteered to come to you while he was at home.”

“What nonsense you *do* talk,” retorted the wife, peevishly—for she had taken an exactly opposite view of the case, and the one thus suggested by the more delicate mind of her husband was far from agreeable to her—“what nonsense you do talk, Sir James Singleton. Lawrence is no more engaged than you are.”

“If he is only as much so,” said the father, laughing, “I shall be saved a considerable outlay in wedding entertainments; but I am inclined to think the fatal knot has yet to be tied, notwithstanding the very rapid style in which Master Lawrence has hitherto conducted his love affairs.”

“I detest jesting on serious subjects,” Lady Singleton said now, with a lofty disdain in her voice and aspect. “But it is my firm belief that you are encouraging the boy in this disgraceful attachment, just out of spite to me.”

“I have heard, my dear,” replied the husband, with the calmest of calm smiles,

“that the propensity to make love matches is hereditary, like the dropsy, or any other unfortunate malady ;—and I believe it.”

Fortunately, looks cannot kill, notwithstanding all the miraculous powers of animal magnetism ; so Sir James Singleton retained the vital spark undimmed, and even appeared unconscious that his wife was gazing at him in a manner that *should have* struck him dead upon the spot.

Another five minutes passed in silence ; and then Janet, ringing the bell violently, inquired whether Mr. Lawrence had returned yet ?

The servant thought he had, but would go at once and ascertain.

“Tell him I desire to speak with him immediately, if you find him in his room,” said the lady mother, in accents of command, and the man vanished to execute her orders.

“A quarter to seven, to a minute,” ventured Sir James at this juncture, pulling out his watch and holding it up for his

wife to see. "Your friend must have met with some accident I should apprehend, as the roads are in an excellent state for the time of year."

The amiable Janet had a sudden fit of deafness, and, consequently, this suggestion of her husband's elicited no reply.

Another weary five minutes ensued; at the end of which Lawrence suddenly appeared upon the scene, and attracted his mother's indignation from his father to himself.

"I suppose," she began, tauntingly, "I ought to feel very grateful to you for coming home to dinner to-day; or, perhaps you altogether forgot that Miss Ashton was expected."

"Far from it," replied Lawrence, drawing a chair to the fire. "Indeed I refused two or three invitations on this very account. I shall be delighted to see Miss Ashton."

"Perhaps you expect she will bring you some three-cornered *billet doux*, or, at

least, a tender message from your country rosebud," continued the ill-judging mother, sneeringly; "but if so you will be disappointed; for I am very sure Miss Ashton has too much aristocratic feeling herself to countenance plebeian connections."

"Come, come Janet!" interposed Sir James, getting slightly ruffled at last, "you are stretching the bow a little too far now. I never heard that clergymen of the established church were considered plebeian; and, for my part, I think Lawrence is perfectly right to consult his own taste in the choice of a helpmate, as his father and mother have done before him."

There was a little spice of malice, perhaps, in this persevering recurrence to their own very imprudent and hastily contracted union. Sir James was aware that his lady had an especial dislike to the subject; but he was of opinion that she had made herself sufficiently disagreeable for the last half hour to merit whatever

sly pricks he had it in his power to bestow upon her.

Happily for all parties, the sudden and welcome sound of carriage wheels prevented a continuance of the useless discussion, and Lady Singleton, recovering her good humour, or at any rate the appearance of it, rushed out into the hall to be the first to welcome her dear Lilla's daughter, whom, also, she had still some hopes of one day calling her own.

Caroline was very cold, very tired, and very little disposed for fine speeches. She could not help feeling,—now that she was actually at Burnham Park, beneath the roof of Lady Singleton,—that there was a sort of hypocrisy in her visit to which she found it difficult to reconcile herself. At any rate, she could not feign any extraordinary cordiality towards her hostess; so, noticing as slightly as possible the enthusiastic welcomes that were lavished upon her, she complained of the cold and followed Lady Singleton to the drawing-room.

Here the polite greetings of Sir James and the earnest welcomings of Lawrence, made her feel somewhat more at her ease, and guessing that they had waited dinner for her, she begged to be shown at once to her room, promising to join them again in ten minutes.

During these ten minutes the father and son managed to get engaged in a very interesting argument, so that her ladyship had no opportunity of using her claws upon either of them. When Caroline returned, dinner had just been announced, and Sir James, offering her his arm, led the way to the dining-room.

There are few tempers, I should imagine, capable of resisting the combined influences of warmth, light, and a well appointed glittering dinner table. Everything at Burnham Park was conducted on a very luxurious scale, in accordance with the taste of its mistress, who, looking round her now as she followed her husband and guest into the room, felt an inward conviction that

she was decidedly an enviable woman, and that, with so many substantial sources of enjoyment, it was extremely foolish and unphilosophical to allow trifles to disturb her equanimity. The manner in which Lawrence had received Miss Ashton had also greatly tended to calm the irate propensities of his lady mother; for being quite of opinion that love is a thing of circumstance and opportunity, she entertained little doubt that, with such a good foundation of esteem to work upon, a very fair superstructure of mutual attachment might be raised, during the long winter days in which her son and Caroline Ashton would be so completely thrown together.

Sir James was well pleased to see the genuine smiles that were again beaming on the lips of his amiable wife; and willing to conciliate the gentle partner of his joys and sorrows, he resolved, as soon as the pangs of hunger were in some degree appeased, to make himself particularly amiable to the young lady whom Lady Singleton evidently delighted to honour.

In pursuance of this intention he turned to Miss Ashton, after sending away a second plate of soup—for in those days this solecism in good breeding was not reckoned quite such a heinous offence as it is now—and inquired what sort of a journey she had had, and whether any accident had occurred to detain her on the road.

The questions were certainly very simple ones; yet Caroline hesitated and glanced stealthily at Lawrence before she replied—

“I met with no accident or adventure of any kind; but having the charge of a young friend who is in delicate health, I had to remain in town till I could deliver her safely to the guardianship of her cousin, with whom she is going to stay.”

A stranger who had entered the room in time to hear this very plain and unpretending speech would have been struck with astonishment in witnessing the different emotions it excited. Of course, there was not one at table who did not immediately guess that Theresa was the

young friend referred to, and had there been any doubt on the subject the slightly tremulous tone in which Caroline spoke would have revealed the fact, and, at the same time, suggested that, for some cause or other, she was more than commonly interested in the companion of her journey.

Sir James, though far from cherishing the least ill will towards the object of his son's attachment, felt embarrassed for the moment at the result of his polite questionings; and not knowing what to say next, he relapsed into rather an awkward silence, leaving his wife to take up the matter or let it drop, as best suited her.

Lady Singleton, though quite ignorant of how much Caroline knew of Lawrence's attachment, was irritated and annoyed by this open allusion to a girl she had resolved to discountenance in every possible way. She thought Caroline showed bad taste—supposing she knew anything—in making Theresa, in ever so slight a degree, the subject of conversation; and she feared

that, in case of her *not* knowing anything at present, Lawrence would now say or do some foolish thing that must have the effect of betraying his unfortunate prepossession in favour of the parson's daughter.

All these ideas, passing with the rapidity of lightning through Janet's active brain, communicated a sudden gloom to her previously animated countenance, which did not escape, any more than her husband's abrupt silence, the observation of Caroline Ashton.

But the latter felt that it was infinitely more important to discover the effect produced on Lawrence by her intentional allusion to Theresa; so, summoning all her courage to aid her, Caroline looked boldly across the table—just as Lady Singleton had bent her anxious eyes in the same direction—and said, quietly—

“ Might I trouble you to bring me one of those fire-screens? I feel the heat getting oppressive.”

Lawrence might be a dreamer, and a bookworm, and a philosopher, and a great deal more in the sublime and heroic sort of way; but he had an excellent share of observation and penetration to back these grandiloquent tendencies; and, as he returned the quiet glance Miss Ashton gave, the latter felt an instant conviction that he knew all about the object of her visit, and was no more discomposed by this than by her casual mention of Miss Berrington as the companion of her journey.

As he brought the screen and adjusted it at the back of Caroline's chair, he managed to say to her in a low voice,—

“I was very sure you would be a faithful shepherd to the deserted lamb; and, though a harder task is before you now, I have unbounded faith in the powers of one whose judgment is guided by so true and kind a heart.”

Caroline heard these whispered words with indescribable satisfaction. She knew

now that her course was clear and defined ; that Lawrence would be acting with her, and that he approved the somewhat romantic scheme she had undertaken.

Lady Singleton, in the meantime, was all wrong in her conclusions. She had remarked her son's perfect self-possession when the lady of his love was spoken of—she had observed him whispering to Miss Ashton, and Miss Ashton smiling serenely at what he said. She had no idea that there could be any understanding between them concerning Theresa ; and, though there was evidently a mystery somewhere, the puzzled Janet resolved to give her peculiar hopes and wishes the advantage of it, and to play, at any rate for this one evening, the character she would have appeared in had Caroline really come to Burnham Park as her acknowledged daughter-in-law elect.

Sir James and his son went out after dinner, and left the ladies to themselves ; but they confined their conversation to the

most general topics. And, when Caroline retired for the night, the impression uppermost in her mind was, that Theresa would need, by and bye, all her husband's tenderness and affection to shield her from the cold and narrow minded worldliness of her very weary mother-in-law.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next morning happened to be particularly fine, and Lady Singleton was most anxious to take advantage of it in showing her guest over the gardens and shrubberies. She had mentioned her plan at breakfast, hoping that Lawrence would offer to accompany them; but in this she was disappointed—and nothing remained for her but to make the most of the *tête à tête* that would now be afforded her, with the “nice, sensible, clever creature” she had at last got beneath her roof.

There really was very much to admire, in every way, at Burnham Park; and Caroline’s expressions of admiration were as genuine as they were enthusiastic. Having spent so many years at school, she had, of course, seen nothing yet at all

to be compared with a place like this ; and Lady Singleton's pride, or rather vanity, had seldom been more gratified than it was by the earnest praises bestowed on her luxurious home by the daughter of her aristocratic friend.

"I am so glad you like it, dear Caroline," said Janet, waxing quite familiar and affectionate ; "because I shall now hope to have a visit from you every time you come to the country. Your dear mamma was so delighted when she ran down for a few days, before sailing for Madras, that she declared, if ever she should be a widow, she would come and live here altogether with me."

"It must, indeed, be a perfect paradise in the summer," Caroline said, as she gazed around her admiringly, and thought how surprised Theresa would be at the magnificence of her future home.

"Ah ! you must see it in the summer," replied Janet, smilingly. "But it is getting too cold for you to stay out longer at

present. We will take our work and go and have a nice, cosy chat by the library fire."

Caroline found no opportunity that day of doing anything to advance Theresa's interests, as Lady Singleton appeared studiously to avoid all mention of Elderton and its inhabitants. She spoke, however, a good deal of her son, laughing at his eccentricities and bringing forward his least amiable qualities, with what she considered exquisite tact, to induce Miss Ashton to take up the cudgels in his defence. But Caroline had no intention of feigning what she did not feel; so, presuming the mother to be the best judge, she quietly assented to all her companion said—merely observing that Lawrence appeared to her much less gloomy and abstracted than when she had first been introduced to him.

Janet was not altogether satisfied with the result of this first cosy chat; but she wisely reflected that Rome was not built in a day, and resolved not to be disheartened at present.

Caroline wrote a few lines to Theresa in the afternoon, and gave the letter to Lawrence to post. It was not her fault that he never looked at the address; though it was certainly a pity that she should have mentioned to Theresa what she intended to do, as it caused that poor child to watch every day with frantic eagerness for the arrival of the postman, and to cry herself nearly into fits at each successive disappointment.

Sir James and Lawrence both stayed at home the second evening, and Caroline exerted her musical talents for their entertainment. Now was the hour for Janet to triumph and rejoice, for Lawrence was, as usual, completely entranced by the sweet sounds Miss Ashton's genius called forth, and never left her side during the whole time she remained at the piano.

Lady Singleton could scarcely conceal her satisfaction. She was well aware of the mighty spells wrought by music on those who loved it as Lawrence did; and

she felt that if she could only ascertain that Theresa was deficient in this accomplishment, and keep her son at home every evening, the success of her plan would be certain.

“How divine, how exquisite your talent is!” she exclaimed with fervour, as Caroline at length left her seat and came towards the fire. “Tell me, my dear Caroline, have you not made an immense sensation in that isolated village of yours, where, I suppose, not a creature besides yourself has ever been within half a mile of a piano.”

“Oh, indeed, you are mistaken,” replied Miss Ashton warmly. “Miss Berrington, the clergyman’s daughter, plays and sings almost as well as I do, and there was a cousin of her’s at Elderton for a short time who had a voice like a nightingale.”

Lady Singleton’s frowns might have deepened to a regular fit of sulkiness, had not Lawrence said immediately—

“Miss Ashton is too modest to be

strictly just. Beyond all dispute she is the first musician at Elderton; and, for what Miss Berrington knows, she is indebted to this generous and accomplished young lady."

Lady Singleton was partly mollified, though she could not help speculating during the remainder of the evening on the curious folly and short-sightedness that had prompted Caroline to communicate the talent which formed her chief attraction to one who, by all accounts, so greatly excelled her in every external grace and beauty.

Sir James Singleton played a game at chess with Caroline after supper; and, though she beat him without any difficulty, he declared she was a very charming person, and confessed to his wife that he should have been well pleased had Lawrence happened to lose his heart in that quarter.

"Well, well," said his lady, mysteriously, "stranger things have happened

than the transfer of a young man's affections; and I have not the shadow of a doubt that, if you would consent to act with me, we might easily manage yet to have that sweet girl for a daughter-in-law."

"Oh, hang it!" replied Sir James, bluntly, "I'm not going to meddle with young people's love affairs. Let Lawrence please himself, as I did; and then he's got nobody else to blame if it turns out ill: besides, my dear, depend on it Miss Ashton's too proud to accept a heart that has once been given to another."

"Much you know about it!" retorted Janet, in a tone of indignation, which closed the discussion for the night, as Sir James was too sleepy and too indifferent to risk giving further offence to his gentle helpmate.

A few more days passed in precisely the same way as this had done, and Caroline began to think it was high time she exerted herself seriously in the cause

which had brought her to Burnham Park. She had hoped, and confidently expected that Lawrence would find an opportunity of speaking to her about Theresa, and of giving her some clue whereby she might guide her efforts in their behalf. But, with the exception of those few whispered words on the evening of her arrival, he had never made the most distant allusion to his absent love; or, as he truly called her, his “deserted lamb.”

There was something in this conduct which Caroline did not quite like, and which she found it difficult to explain, without imputing to him that constitutional coldness of heart which Isabel Darlington did not scruple to ascribe to him. Did he think himself so secure of Theresa’s affection, that he need take no trouble of any kind to preserve it? and was the hope of calling her his own of such very second-rate importance that he could calmly leave it all to chance, and go on with his dreamy studies as though nothing had ever occurred to interrupt them?

Caroline's cheek glowed with indignation for her friend as no satisfactory answers suggested themselves to these questions, and she resolved to have an understanding with Lawrence before she moved one step further in the matter.

He was leaning over her that night as usual, while she sang and played for the general entertainment, and ascertaining that the elders were deep in a game of piquet, Caroline asked abruptly when he was going back to Elderton.

"I am only staying now on your account," he replied frankly; "but why do you ask?"

"Perhaps, because I have been myself interrogated on the same subject," said Caroline, with a little intentional reproach in her voice.

Lawrence now drew a chair close to the piano, and as his companion ran her fingers lightly over the keys that their voices might not reach the piquet players at the other end of the room, he said with earnest gravity—

“I am most grateful to you, Miss Ashton, for the interest you take and have always taken in a matter that concerns me nearly. My mother is at present hopelessly prejudiced against—everybody but yourself, I believe; but when you write to your friend, tell her we shall meet again at Elderton. Now sing me that Irish melody once more, if you please, and then you shall warm those poor frozen fingers.”

From this rather ambiguous speech Caroline gathered confirmation of what she had from the first suspected, namely, that Lady Singleton still entertained hopes of marrying her to Lawrence; and she imagined, also, that he intended her to understand there would be no chance for Theresa until this expectation was crushed for ever.

Supposing these conclusions correct, Lawrence's reserve was partly accounted for, as it was easy to understand how embarrassing it must be for a gentleman to tell a lady, in plain terms, that he was persecuted for not falling in love with her.

That he had contrived even to hint it at last, Caroline thought a proof of moral courage deserving of warm admiration; and she made up her mind, from this evening, to work, heart and soul, in his cause.

It happened, the following morning, that she received a letter from Theresa; and as Lady Singleton alone was present when it was delivered to her, she determined at once to use this circumstance as an opening to the subject that had rested so long upon her mind.

You appear greatly interested in that lengthy epistle," observed Lady Singleton, when Caroline had purposely kept it unfolded in her hand for nearly a quarter of an hour. "May I inquire if it is from one of your old school companions?"

This was said with so much affectionate graciousness that Caroline felt almost reluctant, for the moment, to begin the destruction of Janet's favourite castle—but as it was evidently growing mightily every

day, there was really great need for urgent measures ; and Miss Ashton, being more weary than she cared to acknowledge of the chilling atmosphere of Burnham Park, reflected justly that the sooner the curtain was drawn aside the better it would be for all parties. So she replied, almost immediately—

“It is not from a schoolfellow, but from a very dear friend of mine—in fact, from Theresa Berrington.”

“Oh, indeed!” ejaculated Lady Singleton in that peculiarly freezing tone which so plainly intimates a desire to drop the subject.

“Yes,” continued Caroline, obstinately deaf and blind to her companion’s wishes ; “and the account she gives of her health makes me quite anxious about her. You would not be surprised, Lady Singleton, if you knew Theresa, at any degree of interest she may excite.”

Whether Janet felt that she was fairly in for it now and could not help herself, or

whether she was seized with a sudden curiosity to hear all she could about Theresa, is, of course, a matter of doubt; but certain it is that she made an effort to smoothe the wrinkles on her forehead and to modulate the acrimony of her voice as she said, with well-feigned indifference—

“Tell me something about her then, Caroline. I am quite prepared to feel an interest in any friend of yours.”

“It would be so difficult to describe Theresa,” said the other warmly; “for she has few distinctive points of character, and her singular charm consists, I think, in a loving, clinging, yielding nature, which belongs peculiarly to herself. Gentle and docile as a child, she is yet a companion for the most intellectual, being endowed with an aptness of comprehension and a quick appreciation of talent as attractive as it is rare.”

“You paint in glowing colours,” Caroline Ashton, ”observed the attentive listener; “but what of the casket in which

this jewel is enshrined? I have heard that Miss Berrington has some pretensions to beauty also."

"Raphael's most exquisite Madonna is not more lovely than Theresa," said Caroline, energetically; "but if you meet next season in London, a young man named Arthur Cressingham, ask his opinion on this subject."

"Arthur Cressingham!" repeated Lady Singleton, with a sudden increase of colour; "was he not a pupil of Dr. Berrington?"

"Yes; and if ever man lost his heart, he did; and would, if I mistake not greatly, have given all his broad lands and future title to have gained Theresa's heart in return."

Janet had evidently heard something now that surprised and staggered her. She rested her forehead for a minute or two on her clasped hands, and then, looking up abruptly, and approaching her chair nearer to that of her companion, she said, in a strictly confidential tone—

“My dear Miss Ashton, I am going to tell you a little history about Arthur Cressingham; but you must never reveal it to any human being.”

Caroline, of course, bowed assent; and Lady Singleton continued—

“I cannot recollect how long it is ago, but somewhere in the autumn, I know it must have been, that a letter reached me from this very young man, advising me to recall Lawrence from Dr. Berrington’s if I wished to preserve him from a romantic attachment to the rector’s daughter. The writer assured me that he had the purest motives for this interference, and rather hinted at the *expediency* of my concealing the part he had played in the matter than requested secrecy as a personal favour. I confess I was greatly astonished at the whole affair; but towards Mr. Cressingham I felt simple gratitude, as, of course, however charming Miss Berrington may be, I should not desire her for my son’s wife.”

Caroline opened her soft eyes with so admirable a look of astonishment that poor Janet felt completely discomfited for the moment.

“I mean my love,” she said, hastily, “and here I am quite sure you will agree with me, that all unequal matches are imprudent, and that an obscure parson’s daughter would find herself sadly out of her element amongst the circles to which my son’s wife must necessarily be introduced.”

Caroline laughed now lightly and pleasantly.

“For my part,” she replied, “I consider Theresa too good for any man breathing; but I am sure if she had happened to marry Arthur Cressingham, there are no circles he could have introduced her to, of which she would not have been the chief ornament.”

“You make me quite curious to see this phoenix,” Lady Singleton said, rather bitterly; adding, soon after—“And do

you know why your friend declined marrying Arthur Cressingham? She surely can never expect to have such another chance."

"I doubt," replied Caroline, firmly, "whether Mr. Cressingham ever went so far as to propose; because he must have seen from the beginning that Theresa's affections were otherwise engaged."

Poor Lady Singleton! she may well be pitied now! The castle that has been tottering for the last half hour has got its final blow—is fairly levelled with the dust. Alas!

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall—
Humpty Dumpty got a great fall;
Not all the king's horses nor all the king's men
Can set Humpty Dumpty on the wall again."

There was really quite a touching plain-tiveness in her voice as she said, in reply to Caroline's last observation—

"I suppose it will end in Lawrence marrying this girl; but you must not expect me to be enchanted at the prospect,

when you remember how long I have cherished the hope of calling *you* my daughter."

Caroline was instantly softened. She took Lady Singleton's hand, and, pressing it with sincere and grateful warmth, said earnestly—

"Dear Lady Singleton, I appreciate your kindness and good opinion in proportion as I feel my entire unworthiness of them. But I should never have suited Lawrence any more than he would have suited me. Theresa is quite prepared to love and venerate you, whether you consent to her marriage with your son or not; and, with a very little kindness, you may attach to yourself for life one of the warmest, purest, and most innocent hearts that ever beat in a human bosom."

"Caroline," said Lady Singleton, abruptly, "I do not for a moment doubt that all you assert is true; but, to speak frankly, it will take time to reconcile me to the new ideas this conversation has

suggested. I feel quite out of sorts and nervous now. Let us dismiss the subject altogether for to-day."

Caroline was more than willing to accede to this request, and as her valour had cost her a severe headache, she spent the remainder of the morning in her own room, wondering whether she had really acted wisely for Theresa, and reflecting very sadly on the fate of another in whom she was not less deeply interested.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. Darlington, though not a rich woman, had a very comfortable little income of her own; and if she had chosen to live in the country she might have kept a phaeton and a page in buttons, and been looked up to as a small star of very creditable brightness. But the pretty widow had a fancy for London and its independence; so she installed herself, on the death of her husband, in some remarkably pleasant apartments situated in one of those quiet, unexceptionable streets in the immediate vicinity of Hyde Park, contented herself with one respectable female servant, and managed to get into nearly all the pleasantest, if not quite the highest, circles in London.

Her object being simply that of passing

amusement, Mrs. Darlington was delighted at the thoughts of introducing Theresa into her favourite sets. She felt certain that her young cousin's fresh and singular beauty would make, in one evening, more impression than her own liveliness and wit had done during the many years she had exerted them for the entertainment of her agreeable friends; but this consideration gave her no uneasiness, or, if it did, the hope of making a good match for "Tessie," and saving her from the rough paws of her bearish lover, amply atoned for any personal apprehensions of rivalry.

It was really a grievous disappointment, as well as a source of considerable irritation, to the kind-hearted Isabel, when Theresa, on her arrival, protested loudly against being taken into society, and declared—on her cousin's urging it, first as a favour to herself, and finally as a duty to her parents—that her health was quite unequal to the exertion, and that she would rather return to Elderton at once than be teased any more about it.

Upon this hint the window held her tongue; and for a week or two, declined cheerfully every invitation that was sent to her, that she might devote herself to the oft times thankless task of amusing her melancholy and dejected companion. But Theresa grew worse and worse, in spite of all her cousin's sacrifices and efforts in her behalf; so, at length, Isabel suggested that as she was moping to death and offending her acquaintances for nothing, she might as well resume her original habits, and leave her guest to the solitude she had such a fancy for.

Theresa was well pleased with this arrangement; and the most cheerful smiles that had beamed on her pale face since her arrival in London, were excited by the task of assisting Mrs. Darlington to dress herself for the first party to which she had consented to go.

"I shall not be late, my love," said the bright little widow, as she turned, after a final glance into the mirror, to bid her

cousin good bye: "but of course you will go to bed at your usual hour, and there is the piano and loads of books to amuse you in the meantime."

"Oh, I shall manage very well," replied Theresa quickly. "Do, dear Bella, enjoy yourself without one thought of me."

"So I will, Tessie, on condition that you summon up no shaggy-headed, long-armed ghost to beguile your solitude. Promise me on your honour you will not, and I shall depart happy."

"Indeed Isabel, I will invoke no melancholy spirits of any kind," replied Theresa: but the tears were in her eyes as she spoke, and Mrs. Darlington did not in the least believe her.

It is a common error, with people who are unhappy, to imagine that solitude will assuage their troubles, or, at least, give them the power of enduring with greater fortitude. Experience proves, on the contrary, that courage rises with the necessity for exerting it, and that the

spirits which have become tolerably composed while keen eyes are watching them, sink into hopeless despondency when removed from human observation.

Theresa found this to be the case on the present occasion ; for no sooner had Isabel's carriage rolled from the door, and the quiet servant retired after placing candles on the table, than a sensation of utter loneliness and desertion fell upon the poor child's aching heart, and made her wish she had braved all the imaginary horrors of a public assembly, rather than exposed herself to the real torments of this dreary and unpitied solitude.

There were certainly, as Isabel had said, "loads of books" of every sort and kind, and there was an excellent piano and music in the greatest abundance and variety ; but what was all this to Theresa, who, in her happiest moments, had no decided taste for reading, and who had never practised in her life but from necessity, or to give pleasure to one she loved.

Either of these resources, therefore, was quite out of the question. She might add a few stitches to a certain very elaborate and delicately wrought purse which had been begun in happier days, and she might vary this amusement by occasionally running her eye over Caroline Ashton's last letter, which was kept at the bottom of a pretty little silk reticule—because pockets had not, at that time, come into fashion amongst ladies of gentle birth; but anything beyond, Theresa felt it would be ridiculous to attempt, especially as each time the letter was opened she became more and more engrossed with its contents.

There was nothing cheering in it—for Caroline had written it at the time when Lawrence's reserve and apparent indifference made her doubt the wisdom of encouraging Theresa's hopes. There was one passage which the latter dwelt on particularly with a sort of morbid and infatuated desire to increase her wretchedness, and which, certainly, amply fulfilled

its duty in this respect. After detailing the few occurrences of any interest at Burnham Park, Caroline added—

“Much as I desire your happiness, dear Theresa, and in the way that you imagine it is alone to be insured, I dare not say yet, that I could see you united to Lawrence Singleton with perfect satisfaction. He is still too much of a riddle to me—too little like his fellow men. I fear—yes, certainly, I greatly fear—that he is incapable of devoted love. That he admires you excessively, and even wishes one day to make you his wife, I can scarcely bring myself to doubt; but will this be sufficient, dearest, for all your life’s happiness? Oh! Theresa, when I picture you neglected, treated coldly—perhaps, at times, capriciously—by the man you so passionately love, and that man your husband, my very heart sinks within me, and I feel inclined to pray that you may never meet this terrible Lawrence Singleton again!”

It was not of the least use for poor The-

resa to read these cruel words time after time, as if familiarity would rob them of their sting. Yet she persisted in doing so till the burning tears gushed in torrents from her eyes, and every object in the room grew dim and wavering as her gloomy and sickening thoughts.

But there came a sudden and most unlooked-for interruption to this paroxysm of girlish misery. Mrs. Darlington's respectable servant opened the parlour door in a much more abrupt and rapid manner than was usual with her; and, without appearing to notice the young lady's tears and evident agitation, said, in a decidedly mysterious tone—

“If you please, miss, there's a gentleman down stairs asking to see you.”

If hearts ever did or could burst their prison bars, or leap up into their possessors' mouths—as they are sometimes, in lively metaphor, said to do—there can be no doubt that Theresa Berrington's would have performed one or both of these feats

on the present occasion. As it was, even the very wild and overpowering fluttering that took place in that sensitive region, the instant the above announcement had been made, was so alarming, that the surprised waiting woman rushed to the mantelpiece for a bottle of eau-de-Cologne, and exclaimed, in a tone of real commiseration—

“La, miss, you don’t look fit to see anybody to-night, to be sure !”

“I am so stupidly nervous,” replied Theresa, presently, as she wiped the tears from her eyes and tried to regain some degree of composure; “but I shall be better by and bye. Did you not ask the gentleman’s name Martha?”

“Certainly I did, Miss; but he said, that was of no consequence; I was only to tell you it was an old friend.”

“Well, Martha, I will see him. You had better show him up stairs at once.”

The woman retired; and now, indeed, Theresa appreciated the blessing of a few

moments' solitude, in which she could gather into some order her scattered and rebellious thoughts, and tutor her wildly-beating heart into a state of patient calm, that might veil every trace of its recent excitement.

"He said the name was of no consequence," she repeated softly to herself; adding—with a glad smile of recovered hope—"he knew well it was written on my heart, and that I should at once acknowledge him not only as an old friend, but as my best friend—my dearest—my own Lawrence!"

It was very fortunate for Theresa that she did not possess the bad habit to which sentimental heroines are so often addicted—of uttering her thoughts aloud. Had she done so on the present occasion, the consequences might have been rather embarrassing; for, as the word "Lawrence" was whispered caressingly to her inmost heart, the door opened abruptly, and Mrs. Forrest's nephew, instead of Dr. Berring-

ton's pupil, stood gazing at the solitary occupant of the room.

To say that Theresa was bitterly disappointed,—that her glowing hopes were suddenly quenched, as by the fall of a mighty avalanche,—would be to convey but a shadow of the cruel reality to the reader's mind. For there was something terrible and overwhelming in the darkness that appeared to fall, in one instant, upon her soul, and through which she had barely power to distinguish who it was that had intruded upon her solitude, and who evidently waited for some word of welcome or of recognition ere he made his errand known.

It was so natural that she should at once have concluded her unexpected visitor to be Lawrence Singleton—not only because he was far more constantly in her thoughts than any other person, but because she had been, day after day, watching vainly for a letter from him; and this unannounced visit would have been such

a delightful and satisfactory explanation of his mysterious silence.

Poor Theresa! she had yet many and many a bitter lesson of life to learn; but she could scarcely experience more poignant suffering than the breaking of the brilliant bubble this unsubstantial fabric of hope occasioned her that memorable evening.

But, after a few minutes of anguish that almost amounted to stupefaction, she regained sufficient presence of mind to crush down into her quivering heart this vain sorrow, and to give a civil, if not a friendly welcome to Philip Maranham.

“You are yet very ill,” he said, in a voice whose strange unsteadiness even Theresa was roused to notice, “or you have a hidden grief that may be a faint shadow of mine. Theresa, I am thankful to have found you alone to-night.”

The very words of this address appeared to the surprised listener unusual and incomprehensible; but the manner of the

speaker had a wildness and a sadness in it, that gave ten-fold force to the brief and rapidly spoken words.

"I fear you are not well yourself, Mr. Maranham," Theresa replied, hesitatingly, as Philip, uninvited, drew a chair opposite to her own.

"Perhaps not," he said, pushing back his thick waving hair, and disclosing features sharpened, apparently, by some fierce inward conflict. "But what is health or strength, or life itself, when the passions of a human soul are doomed to a slow and torturing decay? Theresa, I know that you are pure and innocent as the angels of heaven; but you will learn one day—and therefore I may as well tell you now—that there are some natures as unlike your own as gentle rain-drops are unlike the boiling and seething ocean—some hearts that nourish flames as fierce and wild as those which smoulder for a season beneath the green and fertile earth. Miss Berrington, your looks ask if I have

come all the way from Elderton to talk such nonsense as this. I answer, that I have—and greater nonsense too, if the foreboding at my heart be realised. But I have made a vow to speak to-night; and not even those soft blue eyes, which would be more potent with me than the flaming swords of paradise, shall keep me from fulfilling it.”

Theresa felt agitated and frightened, and certainly wished her companion anywhere but in his present position; but a sentiment of compassion, mingled with a consciousness of her inability to get rid of him, induced her to yield passively to her fate, and even to signify that she would listen to whatever he desired to say.

“It is this, Theresa,” he continued, with increasing excitement—“that the stars, or the planets, or the ‘fates,’ arranged at our births, either that one thread of destiny should do between us, or that the two threads should become so inextricably entangled that the disuniting of them must

occasion total destruction to one at least. It is for you, Theresa, to decide upon the future—for you to choose which of these two conditions shall be realised. But before you speak, have patience with me yet for a few short minutes. I am not going to tell you that I love you—that you are to me the embodiment of all that is dear and lovely upon earth—of all my dreams of purity and brightness; because this you must long ago have discovered. Neither am I going to excite your pity, by declaring that my happiness will be wrecked for ever, if you refuse to listen to my prayers—for many a poor devil suffers shipwreck of every earthly hope, and gets used to his losses in the end. But I am going to tell you, Theresa, that if you reject my love, you throw from you a treasure—yes, I say it advisedly, and repeat it yet again—a treasure that, beautiful and worthy as you are, will never be offered you a second time. I am poor—as you probably know. I should have

scarcely a home, much less the luxuries of life to give you; but, as sure am I as of eternity, that with the deep love I feel, I could surround your path with more sunshine than he could do who showered upon you the riches of a kingdom, and lacked the wealth of tenderness and devotion that I could—that I do, in all humility, dearest, beloved Theresa! and with a trembling consciousness of my utter, utter unworthiness—that I do now, and for ever offer you.”

Philip paused here abruptly, and sat gazing with a touchingly wistful, yet almost hopeless expression at the bending, shrinking figure before him. He could not read encouragement in Theresa's pallid cheek and drooping eyes; neither did he know that keen self-reproach and condemnation formed the most bitter ingredients in the cup of sorrow and regret she was at present draining for his sake. But nearly despairing, as he believed himself to be, he was by no means pre-

pared for the sudden and startling energy with which poor Theresa—as a sort of tardy atonement for her previous reserve and obstinate blindness—said, weeping bitterly the while—

“Philip Maranham, I deserve to be humbled to the dust—and Heaven knows I am so at this moment. Another time I might be able to express some of the feelings with which your noble and disinterested attachment has filled my heart; but, at present, my thoughts are in strange and miserable confusion, and all I can do is to trample on the wicked pride that has too long sacrificed everything to itself, and confess to you that even before we met I loved another with my whole heart and soul—that while life is granted me, this love must continue the one ruling principle—the solitary passion of my weak and unworthy nature.

For a timid, sensitive, and retiring girl, like Theresa, there was a magnanimity and a nobleness in this frank avowal that

could not be too highly estimated. At its conclusion, she buried her glowing face in her hands, and Philip could see the slight, delicate frame trembling with powerful emotion.

For himself, it might be supposed that, his errand being done, he would gladly spare Theresa and himself the pain of any further intercourse,—that he would at once perceive the expediency of removing his own sorrow from the observation of one who was evidently weighed down with her individual griefs and disappointments. But Philip did not move. He seemed, indeed, to be deprived of the capability of doing so. There was a fiery spot upon his cheek and an almost savage light in his eye, which suggested the idea of some stormy passion triumphing for awhile over reason and understanding.

When Theresa, after several minutes' interval—during which she had hoped and expected that her companion would quietly depart—slowly raised her head, he was

sitting gazing at her with a look in which love, pity, and unutterable anguish were so strangely blended with the fierce expression above alluded to, that she started up with an impulse of momentary terror, and exclaimed, tremblingly,—

“Philip, what ails you? why do you look at me in that way?”

A wan, ghastly smile played upon his features for an instant, as he replied—“Sit down, Theresa. I will not frighten you again, though I believe that there are feelings in my heart to-night that might well appal far stouter nerves than yours! Theresa, this may be our last meeting on earth, therefore do not grudge me for a few minutes longer the shadowy happiness that hovers round me while I see you still before me. I will not ask the name or station of the man you love; I will only pray to heaven that he and I may never meet. Your words would seem to imply that your passion is as hopeless as my own; but this cannot—or, at any rate, will not—be for

long. Yet, Theresa, I tell you now, and hereafter you will acknowledge that I was no false prophet,—I tell you now, that this man will never love or venerate you as I would have done: that he will not make you the sole thought of his existence—will not reckon your happiness of more value than his own life—will not watch your every look, or hang upon your every word, or daily and hourly thank his Maker for granting him the priceless blessing of your affection—as I would have done. No, no, Theresa, though you are worthy to inspire the idolatry of every son of Adam, you will never again be loved as I have loved you; and, in spite of all the personal anguish that is gnawing my heart at this bitter moment, and clamouring for my undivided thoughts, I am expending my saddest anticipations—my darkest fears on your future destiny. Theresa, you were not formed to live without warm and exclusive human love.”

The wildness of Philip's aspect had in

some measure passed away while he was speaking, but all the passionate sadness lingered still, and Theresa, whose very soul was touched, went gently towards him and put her hand in his.

“Philip,” she said, “you must tell me, before we part, that you forgive me for having doubted the reality of your attachment. I feel now that I should have acted upon the kind advice of one who knew you far better than I did, and who wished, from the first, to let you understand that my affections were pre-engaged. But regrets are vain and idle now ; and all I can say is, that I would to heaven we had met sooner, or had never met at all. Do not prolong this painful meeting : it is only heaping up for me more bitter memories than I hold already in my heart. To wish you happiness just now would seem, I fear, a mockery ; yet I may express an earnest wish that time and change will soon bring you entire forgetfulness of one who is no less miserable and despairing than yourself.”

“Then, if so, Heaven help you, Theresa,” exclaimed Philip with bitter energy, as, starting abruptly from his chair, he presses for a few seconds, with frantic tenderness, the hand that had been yielded to him; and, without another word or look, walked like a person in a dream from the room.

Theresa listened anxiously till she heard the street door close, apparently of itself, and rapid footsteps hastening down the steps. Then she quietly extinguished the candles, and taking her little lamp, hurried to her own room, and secured herself from the possibility of curious observation for the remainder of the evening.

When Mrs. Darlington returned, at one o'clock, Martha had to tell her mistress that Miss Berrington had gone to bed long before her usual time; and that, prior to this, a strange, wild-looking, young gentleman had been with her for more than an hour, and rushed out of the house at last without even shutting the door after him, and with a face—as Martha, being in the

area at the moment, could very plainly see—more like a risen corpse than anything natural or human.

“Poor Tessie!” said the kind-hearted little widow, as she unplaited the long tresses of her beautiful dark hair. “Take her a cup of chocolate in the morning, Martha, and avoid any allusion to the visit of this unnatural looking youth.”

CHAPTER XVI.

ALTHOUGH Caroline Ashton's last recorded interview with Lady Singleton had certainly inspired her with a hope of eventually reconciling Lawrence's mother to his union with Theresa Berrington, the subsequent conduct of the unstable Janet made it appear doubtful whether this desirable end would be accomplished.

From the morning when the subject had been first discussed between them Lady Singleton had appeared to avoid all opportunity of private converse with Miss Ashton. Her spirits, too, had been visibly depressed, and her temper rather more irritable than usual.

As Sir James and Lawrence absented themselves very frequently about this period, Caroline found her position any-

thing but an agreeable one ; and she began seriously to meditate a last effort in her friend's cause, to be followed by her own immediate flight from the cold splendours of Burnham Park to the tranquil and more genial homeliness of Theresa Cottage.

But other considerations besides those of a personal nature influenced Caroline in forming this resolve. She had received a letter from Mrs. Forrest, which, if it did not greatly surprise, certainly grieved and saddened her in no common degree. For in it the nearly heart-broken aunt gave a touching account, first of Philip's terrible and daily increasing dejection after Theresa's departure, and finally of his own abruptly determined journey to London, the object of which, Mrs. Forrest added, could only be to learn his fate at once. "And if," continued the writer, "as now my sinking heart forebodes, this fate be that of a rejected lover, I dare not even think of the consequences. You, dear Caroline, who know my poor Philip, per-

haps better than any one else, will be able to understand—and, I am sure, sympathize with—my fears and anxieties on this account. If I could believe that you were really as willing to quit your gay friends as you say you are, I should be tempted to ask you to return to me as soon as possible; for, in truth, the hours pass very heavily with me in the little cottage now, and your calm, cheerful face would be like a gleam of sunshine in the darkness again.”

This letter affected Caroline in various ways; for, besides the tender pity she felt both for Mrs. Forrest and her nephew, there was a kind of lingering compunction in her heart for the exertions she had been making to put the seal to Philip's misery. She could not doubt the purity and disinterestedness of her own motives, because she had latterly accustomed herself to analyse every feeling in the strictest and most impartial manner; but she fancied that Mrs. Forrest would disapprove of her

interference, and that Philip, if he knew it, would loathe her very name.

These were far from agreeable imaginings, and Caroline's spirits were fast declining to as low an ebb as those of Lady Singleton, when an event occurred which, if it did not brighten the aspect of her personal affairs, at least sufficed to fix her troubled thoughts wholly on the sunnier destinies of others in whom she had long been interested.

She had remained one morning in the library, after breakfast, for the purpose of answering Mrs. Forrest's letter, and she anticipated being left to herself till luncheon time—having heard Lady Singleton invite Lawrence to walk with her to see a person who lived at some considerable distance. But in little more than an hour after the family had separated, the library door was abruptly opened, and Lawrence himself came in, without noticing Caroline, and went up quickly to the writing table, which the latter had just left in favour of a seat by the fire.

For a few minutes Miss Ashton watched him quietly ; but when he had arranged all his writing materials, and taken a pen in his hand, she apprised him of her presence by saying, laughingly—

“ If that is a book you are about beginning, Mr. Singleton, do turn this way, that I may see how authors look when they are inspired.”

Lawrence did not start, but he rose immediately and went towards the fire.

“ I wanted to find you,” he said, “ to ask you where you learnt witchcraft. For you are a witch, Miss Ashton.”

“ Am I, indeed ?” demanded Caroline—amused at his dry, quaint manner. “ On whom have I been casting my spells ?”

“ On my mother. She has just told me that I may marry Theresa when I like.”

Caroline uttered an exclamation of pleased surprise, and waited for the details of the case.

“ I don't in the least understand it,” continued Lawrence ; “ for her ladyship

vouchsafed no explanations. She simply informed me that circumstances had induced her to withdraw her opposition, and that I had better write to Dr. Berrington at once. I immediately concluded that you had practised witchcraft upon her, and I was naturally anxious to ascertain in what school you had learnt the art."

"Well," replied Caroline, "I will initiate you into these dark mysteries another time. At present, let me congratulate you on the happy result which has been obtained by them. Indeed, and in truth, I am unfeignedly rejoiced at your brightening prospects. And my poor Theresa—you will of course write to her immediately?"

Lawrence gazed steadfastly into the fire for a few seconds, then he said,—

"We shall probably meet so soon now that it is scarcely worth while. I dare say you will perform this part of the ceremony for me."

Caroline's looks probably expressed some

portion of the surprise she felt, for Lawrence added quickly—

“You can form no conception of the trouble it is to me to write a letter. My thoughts will not flow naturally in the current of social courtesies. I believe I am more fit for the wild woods, or a hermit's cell, than the smooth artificial world we live in.”

“But—but,” said Caroline, almost impatiently, and wishing at the moment that he had chosen the wild woods for his home, instead of the rectory at Elderton. “Surely there is an immense difference between letters of mere social courtesy and one that on such an occasion you would write to your future wife. Really, Mr. Singleton, if you love Theresa, and intend to marry her, you cannot possibly do otherwise than write to her at once.”

“Then I will do it,” he said quietly; “but you have no idea of the task you impose upon me.”

“It may be that at that moment Caro-

line had a faint foreshadowing in her mind of the peculiar trials that Theresa might hereafter have to suffer, for she remained very thoughtful during several minutes, and then getting up, she turned her steadfast eyes upon Lawrence and said, with earnest gravity—

“ I will never forgive you, if you do not make that dear girl happy. Now write your letters, and I will go and find Lady Singleton.”

* * * * *

It was a cold, wet, foggy, and most cheerless evening in London, and Mrs. Darlington, having abandoned an intention she had formed in the morning of going with some friends to the opera, sat reading a novel by a delicious fire in her very pretty and tastefully furnished drawing-room.

Opposite to her, and with a bit of work in her hand, which was rarely touched, sat Theresa, looking frightfully ill, and only fit—as Isabel had repeatedly told her during the evening—to be propped up

with cushions in a warm bed, and fed with white wine whey or water gruel.

But neither of them had spoken now for nearly an hour, and Theresa, whose body participated in the weariness of her mind, was beginning to dose at intervals in her easy chair, when Mrs. Darlington looked up suddenly from her book and said, gravely,—

“My dear Tessie, I am sorry to appear unkind or inhospitable, but I must send you back to Elderton; I must, upon my honour.”

“When?” asked Theresa, without the slightest show of interest in the matter.

“Why, as soon as possible—that is, as soon as I can find anybody to take charge of you; and failing this, the very moment I can make arrangements for leaving London myself. You are evidently fretting your life away; and as I can do nothing to relieve you, and you will not be amused, I am of opinion that your mother will be the best person to have the care of you.”

“I am sincerely grieved, Bella,” said

Theresa, meekly, "that I should have occasioned you so much trouble as your words imply. I had, indeed, better return home at once."

"Nonsense, child; do talk rationally, if you talk at all. I should, as you know, have been delighted to have you under other circumstances; but what can I do with a love-sick, little simpleton like yourself, whose only occupation, from morning till night, is to sit and dream of a half-crazy, fickle, cold-hearted machine, like Lawrence Singleton? Don't strike me, my dear; you are quite convinced that what I say is true, or you would not pine about him as you are doing."

"It is not kind to taunt me, Isabel," said Theresa, reproachfully. "I am sure I am as lively as I *can* be."

"Lively!" exclaimed the widow, with a queer little grimace. "Commend me to such liveliness on a cheerful day like this. It is a pity you hadn't lived a few centuries ago, as you might have applied for

the situation of court jester, under the influence of your recent liveliness."

It certainly was cruel of this iron-nerved little lady to torment her weaker companion so perseveringly; and it did occur to her, now, that she was straining the bow rather too tightly, when a visible quivering in poor Theresa's throat announced the strong probability of an hysterical fit ending the unwise discussion.

Fortunately for both parties, the postman's startling knock at this critical moment gave a new direction to their thoughts, and sent Isabel flying down stairs to receive a letter she had been for several days expecting.

"One for you too, Tessie," she exclaimed, re-entering the room, and tossing the smaller of the two letters she carried into her cousin's lap. "Take the candle nearer to you, for it seems a rambling unintelligible sort of penmanship; and good luck to you, my dear!"

Theresa's trembling fingers eagerly

grasped the letter; but the first glimpse she caught of the writing occasioned her such intense emotion that she literally had not strength to break the seal.

Mrs. Darlington was happily too much engrossed in her own lengthy and apparently interesting epistle to remark her companion's excitement; and by degrees Theresa summoned resolution to apply her still unsteady fingers to the task of opening this long-expected, and at length despaired of, letter.

A few minutes of total silence ensued; and Isabel, having made herself perfect mistress of her correspondent's sentiments, was quietly refolding the delicately scented paper that contained them, when she was completely aroused from the little reverie into which she had fallen by hearing a strange sound—half laugh, half shriek—and seeing Theresa lean back in her chair, and, after a vain attempt to conquer her emotion, go off into a fit of hysterics that seemed powerful enough to destroy the

slight frame they shook with such unmerciful violence.

Mrs. Darlington was really frightened now ; and, as her servant was not at home, she could only rush to the bed-room for hartshorn and sal volatile, and apply these restoratives in any way that was practicable.

“ Now, Tessie, dear, smell this—drink that—and do, there’s a darling child, compose yourself a little. Oh ! I wish you would not laugh so—it frightens me to death. Now, now, be quiet—there’s a dear ! I can’t make out who has written to you, or what it’s all about. A pretty mess my worthy uncle has made of his pupil business ! ”

So she went on for the space of about ten minutes ; but finding that her cousin’s excitement in no degree abated, it all at once occurred to the half-bewildered widow that coaxing was said to be less efficacious with hysterical patients than severity. At any rate she would try this ; and suddenly

her voice and words underwent a startling transformation. For now it was—

“Oh, you naughty, ungrateful girl, how dare you continue alarming me in this way? It is shameful, disgraceful, wicked of you; and I insist upon your leaving off this moment. I should blush to make myself so ridiculous for any cause whatever; and I *will* know what it is immediately. Give me up that letter, miss—it’s quite useless your trying to keep it from me. Undo your hand instantly, and let me see if I can make out the wretched scrawl.”

But although Theresa only clenched her trembling fingers tighter over the precious letter for this peremptory order to resign it, the harshness of Isabel’s tone appeared to produce the desired effect upon her nerves; and when her cousin paused for breath, the hysterical shrieks were subsiding into little agitated, gasping sighs, that presently gave place to a rain of quiet, gentle tears, mingled with smiles as faint and uncertain as the first streaks of blue in the stormy heavens.

“Well, thank goodness, you are better at last, Tessie,” said Isabel, resuming her natural tone and manner, and laying aside the hartshorn and sal volatile: “but what a fright you have given me, my dear! I shan’t be well again for a month. There, let me put this pillow for you to lean against; I am sure your poor head must be aching sadly. And now, if I may not see the letter, at least relieve my curiosity, and tell me what it’s all about.”

A quick, warm, but most beautiful blush sprang to Theresa’s cheek, as taking her cousin’s hand, she said in a half whispering voice,—

“Oh! Bella, Lawrence has asked me to be his wife; and Sir James and Lady Singleton have given their consent, and he wishes me to return to Elderton, with Caroline, and himself almost immediately; and—and I feel, dear Bella, as if this great and sudden happiness were too much for me.”

The merry little widow stood looking

at Theresa steadfastly for a few seconds, after the latter had finished her explanation; then slowly raising her hands, her shoulders, and her eyebrows, she said, in a voice of exquisitely comical astonishment—

“Well, well, well!—all this fuss about a man! I am now quite convinced that the world is running mad, and I shall expect to see next a woman going into hysterics for the sake of a mushroom.”

CHAPTER XVII.

THERESA, of course, as in duty bound, wrote to her parents immediately, acquainting them with the offer she had received, and entreating their consent to her accepting it. Prior to this, however, letters from Lawrence and his father had reached the quiet parsonage of Elderton, and occasioned a degree of wonder and excitement such as had never agitated the bosoms of the amiable rector and rectoress before.

That their little foolish girl should have given her heart to Lawrence, did not so much surprise them, as her recent very marked avoidance of Philip Maranham had led them to apprehend the existence of a prior attachment, the object of which, Mrs. Darlington's former hints, and the mother's own occasional observations, very clearly

pointed out. Neither did it seem to them, in the slightest degree, unnatural or extraordinary that Lawrence should have been captivated by the rare loveliness and innocence of their sweet Theresa; but that he should so soon have communicated his attachment to his parents, and that they should have raised no opposition to it, did certainly strike both Dr. and Mrs. Berrington as a phenomenon not to be accounted for on any known laws or principles.

“It is, undoubtedly, very flattering to us all,” observed the wife, in the course of the first discussion on the subject. “It would be nonsense to assert otherwise; and, I own, the manner in which Tessie’s want of fortune has been overlooked, gives me an exceedingly favourable opinion of both Sir James and Lady Singleton.”

“I have no doubt that it does, my dear,” replied the husband, smiling slightly; “but it strikes me that the opinion we may be enabled to form of the son will be of infinitely more importance. Tessie’s future

happiness must be our first and great consideration."

"Of course I know and feel that," said Mrs. Berrington, hurt at the implied accusation: "and you are well aware that I have never been anxious for this attachment to continue. But Isabel's account of our child's health and spirits alarms me—she *must* be fretting about something or other."

"Then, my dear Jane, our best plan will be to have Tessie home at once, and let her see these letters, and decide on her own fate. I have had every reason, hitherto, to think highly of young Singleton; and if they like each other, the first principle of happiness, after religion, is established."

"I agree perfectly with you," replied the wife; "and I will write to Bella this morning, so that I may be able, in the afternoon, to run down to the cottage, and have a little talk with Mrs. Forrest about dear Tessie's affairs."

The rector turned away, and began

whistling a tune, that his gentle partner might not observe the smile excited by the exhibition of this truly feminine propensity.

The arrival of Theresa's letter, two days after the foregoing dialogue, decided her parents on sending at once a favourable answer to Burnham Park; and as Lawrence expressed a wish to return to the rectory for the remainder of the winter, it was arranged between Mrs. Berrington and Mrs. Forrest that Theresa should stay a month or two at the cottage, not only for the sake of propriety—which, however, both ladies were anxious for her to observe—but because they thought she might benefit greatly, in various ways, by the companionship of Caroline Ashton. The sole impediment that could have existed to this plan was removed by the absence of Philip Maranham, who had gone back to Ireland immediately after his last interview with Theresa, and whose return to Elderton Mrs. Forrest considered extremely improbable, until time had

enabled him, in some degree, to banish from his memory the bitter associations connected with the place.

And while these agreeable and sensible projects were being formed for her at home, Theresa was basking in the sunshine of her lately acquired happiness, regaining her lost roses, and setting all Isabel's banterings at defiance. Mrs Darlington, though scarcely less rejoiced than Theresa's other friends at the favourable change in her prospects, could not deny herself the gratification of wondering daily and hourly at her cousin's taste, and predicting that she would be sick to death of her bearish husband in a month.

And to all this Theresa's lips seldom replied a word; but her heart repeated, with glad and infinite echoes, "Never, never, never!"

Lawrence and Caroline were now daily expected in London, to which place Sir Jamés was to accompany them, for the purpose of being introduced to his future

daughter-in-law. The thought of this ordeal tempered, in some measure, Theresa's wild joy at the anticipation of meeting Lawrence again as his betrothed wife; but still she was, as Mrs. Darlington declared, exactly like a long-prisoned bird set free, who is in danger of singing himself to death with gladness.

The twilight had just closed in one evening, and Isabel, who had been singing for her cousin's amusement, rose suddenly from the piano, and was going to ring for lights.

"Oh, do let us wait a little longer," pleaded Theresa, earnestly. "This soft fire-light is so dreamy and delightful; and you can sing plenty of songs from memory."

"But, my dear, suppose anybody should call and find us sitting in the dark; they would fancy I was economizing my candles. Who knows whether Miss Ashton may not arrive this evening? and, as your beloved will be certain to accompany her, I would

not miss seeing his face, when he meets you, for the world."

Theresa did not acknowledge that it was this very expectation that made her anxious to remain in the dark; but she begged so hard to have her own way in the matter, that Isabel yielded the point and resumed her station at the piano.

A thousand times, and yet a thousand more, had Theresa pictured her first meeting with Lawrence—giving to him, by turns, every variety of look and gesture that a human countenance is capable of assuming. She hoped, on her part, that she should be enabled to behave with the dignity and composure proper on such occasions; but the idea often suggested itself that it was much more likely she should faint away, or have an hysterical fit from excess of joy.

Sometimes it all appeared like a wild, fantastic dream to her. How was it possible, she would ask herself, that Lawrence Singleton—a being whose mind and genius

raised him, at least in poor Theresa's estimation, as far above her as the shining stars of night—how was it possible that he could stoop to love a little foolish girl like her? Then, the thought of Arthur Cressingham and Philip Maranham would occur to re-assure her; and she would feel unbounded gratitude to Heaven for having gifted her with that outward grace of form and countenance which had won the heart she prized above all earth's precious things.

Now, in this dim twilight, with soft music falling soothingly on her ear, she was picturing a glorious future, whose chief element of happiness consisted in the joy of being no more separated from the man she loved, and of having the blessed privilege of sacrificing self in every way to him.

Philip Maranham had said that she was not formed to live without being loved exclusively and devotedly; but Theresa felt convinced that her attachment to Lawrence was of a nature to be satisfied with re-

ceiving very little, so that it might be permitted to give all—to lay the heart's best treasures on the one beloved shrine.

It is, perhaps, only in early youth that women love in this martyr-like and romantic way; but, although there is a poetic beauty in the passion which exalts it almost into heroism, few would care to glorify themselves by cultivating such creature worship, did they know how little it is ever appreciated or rewarded by those whom nature has made the wooers, and who value women's smiles in proportion as they are difficult to obtain.

"Tessie, I would give something to read all that is passing in that foolish, foolish heart of yours just now," said Isabel, turning round at the conclusion of one of her songs, and trying to catch a glimpse of Theresa's face. "Do tell me whether you were fitting on your wedding dress, or sobbing on your lover's shoulder, when I interrupted the delightful reverie."

"Neither, Bella," answered her cousin

promptly. "I was regretting, at that moment, that my ignorance and want of talent will render me such a stupid companion for Lawrence."

"Ah!" replied Mrs. Darlington, with sudden gravity, "you do well to prepare yourself for some clouds in your married life. But keep a good heart, my dear, and rest assured that if Mr. Singleton really loves you, he will never be eager to detect in his wife those deficiencies of which you are so keenly conscious. Besides, with your position, you will have so many sources of enjoyment, you may create interests for yourself in a hundred ways."

"Oh! Bella," said Theresa, indignantly "I had no thought of my own happiness in the regrets I expressed; I only considered Lawrence."

"Then more goose you, my dear," replied the widow, sharply; "for, if you neglect to look after yourself, depend on it nobody in your husband's family will remind you of the omission. Tessie, I do

not often trouble you with advice, and, therefore, what I am now going to say ought to make the deeper impression. Do not fall into the egregious error of being humble and submissive to your new relations. Whatever humiliating discipline your nature may require, you may safely trust to them for doing it all for you, and in such right good earnest, too, that any exertions of your own would be entirely superfluous. But whatever is the matter, Tessie ?”

This last observation had reference to a sudden spring made by Theresa from her chair to the window, and which she explained, as well as her trembling voice would permit, by calling Isabel's attention to a carriage that had just drawn up before the street door.

“It is, undoubtedly, Miss Ashton,” observed the widow, with a composure that appeared, to poor Theresa, perfectly miraculous; “and here we are in absolute darkness. Do ring the bell, my love, while I stir this miserable fire into a blaze.”

“Oh, there he is!” exclaimed Theresa, almost with a shriek. “Bella, I *could not* meet him before you both. Let me escape into the other room for a few minutes; my heart beats so, and I am quite faint.”

“Heaven help thee, child!” ejaculated the elder cousin compassionately: “but do as you like, Tessie, for the sun won’t shine for ever.”

In spite of faintness, heart-throbbings, and fears of rendering herself ridiculous, the sun was certainly shining with wondrous brilliancy now; and as its radiant beams penetrated into the very depths of that loving soul, Theresa marvelled at the excess of happiness which had been permitted to brighten her path, while so many worthier were left to grope on their dreary way in solitude and darkness.

The first sound of Lawrence’s voice—how it thrilled through every listening nerve—what strange reality it seemed to give to all the delicious dreams and visions of the last few days! Yet he only greeted

Mrs. Darlington in the simplest and most commonplace manner, and did not, as Theresa hoped he might, make any inquiry concerning *her*.

Caroline, however, was not so negligent; and, in reply to her eager and affectionate inquiries, Isabel proposed that they should go in search of the truant, and bring her back to answer for herself. Upon hearing this, Theresa rushed up stairs to her bedroom, where she was almost immediately joined by the two ladies, who declared they had lots to say to each other in private, and that she must positively go down to the drawing-room and amuse Mr. Singleton.

“But, dear Caroline,” pleaded the silly, trembling child, “I have not spoken a word to you yet, and I want to hear so many things——”

“Which you will have ample time to do to-night, as we are to sleep together,” interrupted Caroline, with a kind, though scarcely a cheerful, smile. “Now go, Theresa; love, or Lawrence will be impatient.”

With a light, though still faltering, step, Theresa descended the stairs; and feeling that the longer she delayed going in, the more her nervousness would increase, she grasped the handle of the door with desperate resolution, and advanced timidly and noiselessly into the room.

Her first impression was, that Lawrence had mysteriously disappeared; for the two chairs that had been placed beside the fire were vacant, and, as far as the rays from the lamp extended, there was no one to be seen. But the room was large, and at the farthest end from the door there hung some book-shelves, towards which Theresa, after a moment's pause, instinctively directed her eyes. Her anticipations were not disappointed, for there stood Lawrence, his back to the light, his head, by no means more carefully arranged than formerly, bent completely over a volume he held in his hand, and his whole attitude expressive of the most entire abandonment to his favourite pursuit,

The world could not have produced a more humble-minded or less exacting being than Theresa; but she did think, and the thought gave her a sudden stab, that, at such a moment, her lover ought to have been too joyously excited to care for all the books that were ever written.

True, quite true, that when he became conscious of her presence, he threw down the hateful book and received his deserted lamb, with words of earnest welcome and passionate fondness, into his arms. True, also, that, in the wild joy of being held to the heart of him she so madly loved,—of listening to his whispered assurances that she was unutterably dear and precious to him,—that in this world they would never part again,—Theresa forgot all that it would have been pain to remember. But equally true, that, in the stillness of that long, wakeful, and certainly far from unhappy night, a momentary aching from that first unlooked-for stab would occasionally affect her heart; while Philip

Maranham's till now unheeded words,—“ I tell you this man will not make you the sole thought of his existence,—will not watch your every look, or hang upon your every word, as I would have done,” recurred to her with unwelcome distinctness.

But with the morning's cheering light these faint shadows made themselves wings and flew away, leaving nothing but unclouded sunshine in the soul of her whose dearest hopes had been realized, whose land of promise had been fully attained.

When Sir James Singleton came with Lawrence, after breakfast, to be introduced to his future daughter, he was quite startled by the beaming loveliness that greeted his admiring sight. He looked at Theresa steadfastly for a few minutes, and then, taking her hand and bending to kiss her blushing cheek, he said cordially,—

“ My dear Miss Berrington, I am delighted to make your acquaintance; and whatever I may have thought before I saw you, I think now that Lawrence is the

wisest as well as the luckiest fellow in the world." Then, turning to his son, he added,—"Don't expose this pretty flower too often to the smoky atmosphere of London; it won't do for her in any way. There's room for all of us at Burnham Park; and the more I see of my charming daughter-in-law, the better pleased I shall be."

Theresa was delighted with this kind and even affectionate reception, and naturally thought her future father one of the most amiable persons in the world. Lawrence, too, was well pleased that the first meeting had gone off so favourably, and he told Theresa, during the few minutes they contrived to be alone before starting, that he was very proud of his little wife, and that he was convinced everybody would envy him the treasure he had obtained.

"Well, Tessie," said Mrs. Darlington, as she was bidding her cousin good bye, "and so you are not disenchanted with your marble idol yet; it hasn't frozen even

so much as one of your little fingers at present ?”

“ Ah ! dear Bella,” replied Theresa with such a smile. “ I am proof against your severest railleries now, for the marble idol is mine ; and if it *is* destined to freeze me into ice, I care not, so that it never leaves my heart.”

“ I, at least, shall never seek to rob you of it,” said the widow, with a saucy laugh : “ but if the day does not arrive when you would give all you possess to get rid of it, my name is not Isabel Darlington. But good bye, my dear, and enjoy the fair weather while it stays.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THREE months had passed, and the spring time was come again—the joyous spring, with all its untold riches of flowers, sunshine, and nature's glorious melodies, which, mingling with the winds from the sweet west, speak a language to human hearts that the heart itself, without the soul, would be unable to interpret.

For several weeks the evenings had been fair and mild, for it was now the beginning of May; and on one of the fairest and mildest that the season had yet known, Caroline Ashton and Theresa Berrington, leaving Mrs. Forrest to the companionship of the rector's wife, set out to walk together to the bennel.

The three months that had elapsed since last we saw them, had made little change

in either. Caroline's face—though, perhaps, a trifle thinner—wore the same calm, agreeable expression it had always done ; and Theresa's had only a more developed loveliness—the result of settled, familiar, and perfect contentment.

Three months of deep, intense, and undisturbed happiness had been hers, and this was her wedding eve.

“You will have a bright day to-morrow,” said Caroline, as they sauntered leisurely down the sweet hawthorn lanes. “Those crimson clouds prophesy fair weather ; and the old gardener was very confident on the subject this morning.”

“Oh ! I know it will be fine,” replied Theresa : “but, for my own part, I care little about it. The hardest rain that ever fell could not quench the sunshine in my heart. It is all bright and clear there, Carry.”

“And I am glad and thankful that it is so, dear,” said the other, with earnest kindness in her soft voice. “From the moment

I first saw you I have been deeply interested in your fate, Theresa ; and few things could give me greater satisfaction than the assurance I have now that you are as happy as any one in this world is ever permitted to be."

" Indeed, and indeed, I am, Caroline ; and I do not forget how materially I am indebted to you for the larger portion of my present enjoyment."

" No, no, do not say that, Theresa. I did very, very little for you—smoothed, perhaps, a few difficulties that, sooner or later, must have been got over. I would not for worlds believe that my influence alone brought about this marriage, in case"—

" In case of what, dear Caroline ? Why do you leave your sentence unfinished ?"

" Because I did wrong in beginning it. Don't insist upon an explanation of my folly, Theresa—we have plenty of subjects to discuss without harping upon this one."

" But I know all about it," said Theresa,

with a merry smile. "You meant, in case I should be less happy than I expect to be. Dear, dear Caroline, my only fear is, that I shall be too happy—that this world will become so enchanting to me that I shall never think of another. Ah, me! I suspect I have thought far too little of that other world all my life."

"This is a very general fault, Theresa. They who enjoy the smallest portion of life's sunshine still find enough to attract the hopes and the affections from Heaven. Were it otherwise, we should not need to pass through those waters of affliction which generally roll over us, at one time or another of our mortal pilgrimage, to purify the soul and wean it from earthly idols."

"You are getting very serious, Caroline," said Theresa, abruptly. "I have often fancied so lately."

"Have you, love?—and do you like me the worse for it?"

"Oh, no—nothing could make me love you less than I have always done; but, just

now, at this particular time, I should be pleased to see you as gay and happy as myself."

Caroline smiled. "But I am not a bride, Theresa."

"I wish, with all my heart, you were. I would give much to see you stand beside me in bridal white to-morrow, and the bridegroom one you loved as I love, or *nearly* as I love Lawrence. But you are so superior to all this sort of thing, Caroline—never the least bit in love in your whole life, were you now?"

"Yes," said Caroline, promptly. "I am in love at the present time."

"You, Carry, *you!*" exclaimed Theresa, delightedly. "Oh, if you are not in fun, do tell me everything about it—when it began, and who it is, and all."

"I cannot tell you when it began, for I do not know myself. The 'who' is—the man in the moon; and the 'all' consists in my being quite hopeless of any reciprocal attachment, and enduring my fate as patiently as I can."

Theresa was evidently disappointed : but, after a few expressions of indignation, she laughed merrily, and Caroline laughed too; and then they both seated themselves, having arrived at the bennel, under the very tree where Theresa had first confessed her apparently hopeless love for Lawrence Singleton.

She had often and often walked here since with her affianced husband, and pointed out to him the spot that witnessed her tears and her sorrow on his account; and he had often and often, on such occasions, turned to fold her in his arms, and to tell her, jestingly, that *she* had been the wooer, and that he should certainly, if left to himself, have fallen in love with Miss Ashton instead of with the foolish little girl beside him. But Theresa had learnt to appreciate her own attractions, and even Lawrence could not make her jealous now. She still wondered, intensely wondered, that he should have chosen her for his wife; but the fact that he *had* done so, exalted

her self-esteem to a height which jealousy had little chance of reaching.

The associations connected with the place where the two girls had now seated themselves, effectually diverted Theresa's mind from Caroline's imaginary love sorrows; and after looking round her for a few minutes in silence, and with glistening eyes, the former said, enthusiastically,—

“How beautiful everything is here!—how calm!—how exquisitely serene! I shall often think of the old bennel—the dear old bennel—Caroline, when I am far away from Elderton.”

“I am sure you will, Theresa, and of those whose hearts will follow you in your wanderings. We shall all be lonely and melancholy without you. Poor Mrs. Forrest is quite ill and nervous at the very thoughts of losing you.”

“In spite of the great sorrow I have involuntarily occasioned her,” said Theresa, with sudden gravity. “But I dare say Philip will come back when I am gone.”

Caroline was silent.

“I have no doubt you all think me very heartless on this subject,” continued the other presently : “but, indeed, I am less so than you may imagine. I would yield a good portion of my own happiness—precious as it is to me—to be assured that Philip Maranham was again the joyous, careless being he appeared when first we knew him.”

“You must not look for impossibilities,” said Caroline. “Each one of us must bear his appointed burden; and it is our misfortune—sometimes more than our fault—that we are often doomed to increase, instead of to lessen, the weight our fellow-pilgrims have to carry through the world.”

“It must always be a most painful reflection—that of having brought sorrow to any human being,” observed Theresa, pensively. “But do not let us talk of Philip, to-night, Caroline: it makes me sad, in many ways, to remember my last interview with him.”

“And this is no time for sadness, is it, Theresa? There should not be a single cypress leaf woven into the garland of a bride.”

“And yet—you see I have caught the infection of your seriousness—and yet, Caroline, in the midst of my deep happiness, I could weep freely and abundantly if I were alone. True, I love Lawrence more than the whole world—true, I could follow him, without a murmur, to the wildest and most unpeopled desert. I could—oh! I am sure I could endure poverty, privation, reproach, and death itself, in any form, for him. But one little pang must be allowed me in leaving *my home*, Caroline—the home where I have been so loved and cherished, where every wish has been anticipated, every desire granted, and where I feel that, for days and weeks, perhaps years, my absence will create a blank in those tender hearts, whose affection I have too little appreciated. And then, Caroline, this exquisite place—this

dear, dear Elderton—connected with so many happy memories—how can I think, without regret, of bidding it farewell, perhaps for ever? I do wish—oh, so ardently!—that Lawrence had been poor, like Philip Maranham, and that we might have lived here amongst you all in a tiny cottage (that papa could have built for us), and never needed to go into the busy world, or cast our lot in the midst of strange, uncongenial people.”

“But you like the thoughts of spending six months on the continent—do you not, Theresa?”

“Yes, this I like, for I know Lawrence will find so much to interest and delight him, and he will teach me to appreciate the wonders of nature and art, and we shall be always, always together, and I shall learn how best to please him and contribute to his happiness; but then I wish that, instead of going to Burnham Park (although I have no doubt I shall love his parents fondly, when I know them), that

we were coming back to dear Elderton, to make our quiet home in the centre of these lovely and familiar scenes, which must always, I imagine, seem fairer to me than any other."

"This is perfectly natural. I am sure I should feel the same, although my home is but an adopted one, and I certainly have not the same reasons as yourself for being attached to Elderton."

"My great source of consolation," said Theresa, with affectionate animation, "is, that I shall be likely to meet you oftener, by and bye, than if I had been going to remain in our little quiet village; for, once transplanted into your mother's circles, I suppose you will never be allowed to turn your eyes, much less your feet, towards this unpretending part of the world again."

"I cannot tell how that will be," said Caroline, very gravely: "but, wherever my future destiny is cast, I am afraid I shall always be a perfect Lot's wife, as regards Elderton. You see, Tessie, you cannot

usurp the exclusive right of loving this very loveable spot of earth."

"Oh, I am not jealous of your affection for it, Caroline. But don't you think we have sat here long enough? The sun has some time gone down, and this is about the hour at which Isabel was to arrive."

"We will go, then, dear; for I dare say somebody else has found his way to the cottage before now, and will be impatient at my monopoly of your society."

As the two friends rose to commence their homeward walk, Theresa turned to cast one long, lingering, wistful glance on all around her. The tears rushed to her eyes as she did so, her heart beat thickly for a few seconds, and with this mute farewell she hastened after Caroline, and they walked side by side in silence.

The twilight was now rapidly drawing in, and a heavy cloud or two that had suddenly appeared in the smiling skies made deeper the approaching gloom, and wrapped

the shaded hawthorn lanes, through which the pedestrians were obliged to pass, in comparative darkness.

“Are you afraid of ghosts, Carry?” said Theresa, suddenly breaking the silence, as they entered the first of these somewhat dismal thoroughfares.

“No :” but I do not altogether disbelieve in the possibility of their appearing. I should at present, however, be more inclined to fear meeting a tipsy man returning from the village alehouse. We have been imprudent in staying out so late.”

“Oh, there is no danger, though I have heard the natives tell many a tale of supernatural forms starting up suddenly before them in these very lanes. Hark, Caroline ! what sound was that ?”

“It is like somebody rustling those bushes to the left of us,” replied Caroline, in a low and rather tremulous voice. “I am quite sure it is not the wind.”

“Oh, no—and there it is again. I dare not turn to satisfy myself. Shall we run, Caroline ?”

“That, I fear, would be quite useless—but look, don’t you see figures moving at the far end of the lane? Perhaps they are messengers come in search of us.”

After gazing for a few minutes steadily into the distance, Theresa exclaimed, joyfully—

“Yes, it is Lawrence, I am certain, and, I think, my cousin Isabel. We are safe now, Carry; but promise me not to mention what we have heard?”

“Willingly, as I have no fancy for being left without protection again, while our knight goes in search of the highwayman or hobgoblin who has been alarming us.”

They now hastened on to meet the new comers, who proved to be, as Theresa had said, Lawrence Singleton and Mrs. Darlington; and after listening patiently to a perfect shower of reproaches from the gentleman, for staying out till it was dark, and being affectionately greeted by the lady, the two girls separated—Caroline to walk on in front with the little widow,

and Theresa to follow slowly with him whose simple presence had the power of banishing every trace of gloom and sadness from her mind.

“All sunshine yet, I see,” said Mrs. Darlington to her companion. “Tessie seems to have done more towards thawing the iceberg than I ever thought she would have accomplished. Frankly speaking, my dear Miss Ashton—how do you like the bridegroom in to-morrow’s tragedy?”

“Anything but a tragedy I hope it will prove,” replied Caroline, earnestly; “and, frankly speaking, I am inclined to think highly of Theresa’s future husband. He has certainly good principles, and, I believe, very clear notions of religion. I have, of course, seen much of him during the last three months; and my candid opinion is, that your cousin has a fairer chance of happiness than the generality of young girls who embark on the perilous sea of matrimony with love for their only anchor. There is, at least, no fear of

Lawrence Singleton becoming entangled in the dissipations of the world."

"No, no, no; *that* is not the danger," observed the widow, emphatically. And as Caroline said no more, the conversation reverted to other subjects.

Mrs. Berrington was still at the cottage when the walking party arrived. She waited to take away her darling, who was to pass this last night under her parents' roof—though Mrs. Forrest had been most reluctant even now to resign her beloved guest, and had tears in her eyes when Theresa came in and seated herself between the two very thoughtful-looking matrons.

"You see we have been talking too much of you, my Tessie," said the mother, in an unsteady voice. "This kind friend grieves, almost as deeply as your father and myself, at the thought of losing you: but we must not begin at present, as it is getting late. We shall all meet to-morrow. Will you come with me, love?"

“Let me have her yet for a few minutes alone,” said Mrs. Forrest, chokingly. “It will be for the last time.”

Theresa sprang from her seat as Mrs. Forrest rose from hers, and, twining one arm round the waist of this tried and constant friend, she moved with her towards the open door. As they were passing out, Lawrence came up to his betrothed with a whispered entreaty that she would not delay very long, as he had promised his father—who had arrived only that afternoon, to be present at the ceremony—to join him early at the inn, where they were both to pass the night.

“Pray leave her to me for once, Mr. Singleton,” said Mrs. Forrest, in the sharpest tones that had ever been known to issue from her very gentle lips. “A few more hours and she will belong to you for life. At present, her former friends have some little claim upon her time.”

Lawrence only bowed good humouredly, and allowed the ladies to pass; but The-

resa looked pained at the manner in which he had been addressed; and when they had reached her own little room, she said, in tones of affectionate reproach—

“Oh! my dear Mrs. Forrest, do not let your regard for one so unworthy as myself render you unjust towards the best and noblest being that ever lived. Do not let me have the sorrow of thinking that my future husband has failed to win a favourable place in the kind heart that is prone to judge every one so charitably.”

“Theresa,” replied Mrs. Forrest, “you must forgive me, if I was unjust. At such a time, my darling, I would not grieve you for the world. But this has been a sad day to me, and to-morrow will be sadder still. It is not alone the dread of losing you that casts this gloom over my heart. It is my intimate knowledge of the peculiar trials belonging to a married life—trials which you, my poor, gentle lamb, are wholly unfitted to encounter—that makes me shudder at the thoughts of

this early renunciation of the joy and the freedom of girlhood. Theresa, when I married I was as full of hope, as full of gladness, and, perhaps, as full of love as you are now. In less than a year, I yearned for death, as the sole release, I could imagine, from sufferings whose extent or nature no living being will ever know. But it was not to speak of myself, or to frighten the roses from that dear, soft cheek, that I have brought you from your lover now. That your future life will bear no analogy to mine, I both hope and confidently believe. It is even possible that you may never come in contact with the stormy waters—may never know what it is to cry aloud to the dark grave to hide you in its quiet bosom. But, my child, it may also be that, in spite of our fervent prayers and earnest desires, the bitter cup will be put into your hands; and, what I would say to you, Theresa, is this—drink it silently; seek not for human counsel or sympathy. Receive it as from your

Heavenly Father. Trust to Him to heal the sickness of soul it will produce in His own good time. Remember that God does not cease to be your friend because He chastens you—nay, that it is a special proof of His tender love and watchful care. Go to Him, therefore, fearlessly, with whatever burden you may have to bear. *And go to Him alone!* A girl may have many friends and *confidantes* in her light troubles and grievances, if she is so disposed; but a married woman, when her complaints are against her husband, must have but One—and that One has His throne in heaven, and yet humbleth Himself to behold, with tender pity, all the afflicted children upon earth. Now, Theresa, darling, weep out the tears my words have occasioned to flow, in these arms that would gladly have sheltered you for ever, while I commend you to His care who can alone protect you from the storms of life, and bring you, at last, to the land of everlasting peace and sunshine.”

Theresa did weep freely and passionately for many minutes, as she clung to her scarcely less affected companion, whose tenderly solemn manner, more than the words which accompanied it, had excited this strong emotion in the bosom of her little friend. Whatever impression might hereafter be produced by these admonitions of sad experience, it was not now that they would be likely to sink into the heart of her for whom they had been spoken—not now, when the glorious rainbow of hope spanned all the azure heavens—when the glittering, magic veil was thrown over the whole creation—when every star that shone, and wind that blew, and flower that raised its graceful head, sang to her that love was the mighty enchanter who could transform every sorrow into joy.

* * * * *

Theresa and Lawrence had parted for the last time ere they met to part no more. The father and mother had knelt for the last time with their beloved one at the

family altar. Earnestly and solemnly had she been commended to the guidance of the Heavenly Shepherd; fervently and tearfully had blessings been invoked upon her cherished head; and now, having sobbed hysterically for half an hour in her father's arms, and been forcibly carried thence, at last, by her weeping mother, she was seated at the foot of her own bed, her flushed cheek resting on that mother's shoulder, and listening with silent and most dutiful attention to the gentle maternal counsels that in some shape or other, must always be delivered on a marriage eve.

"It is very natural, my dearest," said Mrs. Berrington, as her lecture drew to its close, "that you should now doubt the possibility of any trouble reaching you through that quarter, whence you have hitherto met nothing but the most unbounded love and devotion. And Heaven forbid that I should insinuate a doubt of this fervent love continuing. No, my

Tesssie ; if I were not fully and entirely convinced that Lawrence appreciates you as you deserve, and will in all things make your happiness his study, I would not give my precious child to him, though his wealth and honours were a thousand times what they now are. But, Tessie, darling, the very best man that ever breathed is selfish in small things—in those things which make up the sum of a woman's life. And here it is that you will have to exercise forbearance—to watch your husband's moods—to adapt your own conduct to his changing tempers. For, as you will find, my love; a man has not those habits of moral discipline and self-control which *we* are so early forced to practise. It is possible, too, that with Lawrence, whose tastes are so decidedly studious, you will be doomed to many weary hours of solitude ; but this you must bear patiently—it is, at the worst, a trifling grievance. With regard to his family, I can give you no general rules, although their conduct,

especially while you reside under the same roof, will, of course, materially influence your happiness. For the rest, my dear, dear child, you must be guided by circumstances and your own good sense. At present, all seems bright and clear before you. God grant that it may be ever so! Now, Tessie, darling, let me, for the last time, place this dear head upon its pillow; and then, as to-morrow will be an exciting day, I will leave you to your repose."

Theresa was too subdued to do more than acquiesce in all her mother's directions. She suffered herself to be undressed, and laid in the pretty little white curtained bed that had been conscious of so many of her sighs and tears on his account who, to-morrow, would be her own for ever.

Then, straining her mother almost wildly to her heart, she closed her eyes, and offered up a fervent prayer of thanksgiving to that Great Disposer of events who had turned her night of heaviness into a dawn of such unutterable gladness.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE crimson clouds and the old gardener had been true prophets, for the morning rose in unusual splendour, and the few light silvery vapours that floated across the sky, served only to render more clear and dazzling the pure blue beyond.

Mrs. Berrington was in her daughter's room at an early hour. She had endeavoured, as far as possible, to banish from her countenance every trace of agitation and sadness; while Theresa, on her part, seemed infinitely more excited and depressed than on the previous evening.

There were no counsels or admonitions to be given now—nothing but the fondest and most devoted love and tenderness.

Before the task of dressing the fair bride was quite completed, Caroline Ashton arrived. She brought with her a very elegant

little gift for Theresa, which was presented and received, with a mingling of tears and kisses, that obliged the poor mother to hurry from the room, lest she, too, should be betrayed into an exhibition of the grief that lay so heavily upon her heart.

“What a lovely dress!—and how charming you look in it!”—said Caroline, hoping to divert Theresa’s thoughts from graver subjects. “Mrs. Forrest and I had some discussion about a bouquet for you, which she was desirous of ordering, but I assured her that it was always the bridegroom who presented this. Of course Mr. Singleton has attended to it?”

“Indeed, I don’t know,” replied Theresa: “but it is of no consequence if he has forgotten it. I can do exceedingly well without one.”

“Oh, but indeed you cannot; such a thing would be an unheard-of atrocity—and in the bonny month of May too! But of course Lawrence has thought of it.”

Theresa smiled at Caroline’s earnestness, and asked if she had seen Mrs. Darlington?

"I have," was the reply. "Your cousin met me at the garden gate. She said she had been gathering a nosegay for herself; that she hated weddings, and should not dare to come up to you, till a cup of coffee had strengthened her nerves."

"Poor, dear Bella," said Theresa. "I really believe she anticipates for me something more than the trials of a Griselda. She never did appreciate Lawrence."

"If you are happy with him she will learn to do so, Theresa. Ah, I'm glad you are going to wear a veil instead of a bonnet. What made you change your mind?"

"Sir James Singleton brought me this as a wedding gift from his wife. Is it not a splendid one?"

"It is, indeed. You saw your future father, then, last night?"

"Yes, he came to fetch Lawrence, and to be introduced to papa and mamma. He was so kind and good, Caroline. I am quite sure I shall love him dearly."

"I suppose the father and son will meet us at the church?"

“I believe that is the arrangement. But, dearest Carry, you have given me no time to comment on *your* appearance yet, although I have been admiring you in silence ever since you came into the room. How I do wish you were a fellow bride, instead of a bridesmaid, to-day !”

“Thank you, Tessie ; but there is small likelihood, I imagine, of my ever playing such an important part, as—except in some old forgotten nursery rhyme—I never heard of the man in the moon coming down to woo.”

“Nonsense, with your man in the moon ! I should not wonder if this is a name you have given to some man out of the moon, who has been lucky enough to win the affections of the best, the wisest, and the dearest girl in England.”

“Such a speech merits a most grateful kiss, Theresa ; so let me imprint one on that fair cheek, which your husband will soon entirely monopolize.”

“And conceal your own guilty blushes,

at the same time, Miss Ashton. Oh, Carry, Carry, Carry!"

Mrs. Berrington now returned to the room, and told Theresa that her father was anxious for her to go down to him, and that Isabel was waiting to pour out the coffee for them, while Mrs. Berrington herself went to don her wedding finery.

"Come, then," said Caroline—passing her arm round the waist of the very beautiful little bride,—“for I am anxious to ascertain whether Lawrence has sent the bouquet.”

They found the breakfast table (at least that part of it which was not occupied by the coffee tray) covered with wedding presents, amongst which was a splendid edition of Shakspeare from Lawrence—but no bouquet!

“This is really unpardonable,” said Caroline, when all the greetings were ended, and everybody seated at table. “I appeal to you, Mrs. Darlington, whether so fair and youthful a bride as Theresa, ought to be married without a bouquet?” o 3

“What! how?” exclaimed the widow, as if the affair had been of the greatest importance. “Do you mean to say that Mr. Singleton has omitted to send her one?”

“It seems like it, indeed,” replied Caroline, quite indignantly. And the rector and his daughter laughed at them both, inquiring whether the ceremony should be put off, while a messenger was dispatched to Oxendean for myrtles and orange flowers.

Soon after Mrs. Berrington's return to the room, they all rose from the table and prepared silently, and with anything but cheerful faces, to enter the carriages that had already stood some minutes at the door. But just as Theresa had her foot upon the step, a breathless messenger appeared in sight, bearing in his hand a basket, which, on being opened, disclosed a bridal bouquet—and such a bouquet!—whose equal, both Mrs. Darlington and Caroline readily admitted they had never seen.

“This is really quite charming of Mr. Singleton,” exclaimed the former. And

Theresa, though she had been so indifferent about the flowers before, smiled delightedly now at this unquestionable proof of her lover's affectionate thoughtfulness.

In a few minutes they arrived at the church, where Sir James Singleton and Lawrence were waiting for them. Dr. Berrington, with the trembling bride upon his arm, advanced first into the ivy-covered porch; and those who came behind listened, in surprise and mystification, to a half-whispered dialogue that took place between Theresa and the bridegroom.

"Dear Lawrence," said the former, "how kind of you to think of getting me these exquisite flowers! I shall never part with them, even when they are withered. But how did you manage to send to Oxendean?"

Lawrence looked down at the bouquet for a few seconds; then he said—

"You are dreaming, Tessie. I never sent to Oxendean. That is no gift of mine."

The father now drew his daughter on

into the church, and nothing more could be said upon the subject.

Theresa was very much agitated during the ceremony—which was performed by a clergyman from a neighbouring village, that her father might be able to present her to her husband : but Lawrence evinced remarkable composure, and uttered the responses in a voice of singular clearness and distinctness. Dr. Berrington looked graver than he had been ever known to look before, and the poor mother cried, without ceasing, from the moment they entered the church.

But soon—how strangely soon it appeared to Theresa!—all was over, and she was pressed alternately in the arms of her friends and husband, and heard herself styled “Mrs. Singleton,” and listened dreamily to the wildly joyous peal of her wedding bells, and looked round on the old, familiar church, and saw the bright sun streaming through the quaintly latticed window, and the tall elms waving in the summer breeze—everything so natural,

so suggestive of the peace and happiness of her vanished girlhood—and felt that a new life had dawned upon her, and asked herself if it would in truth be fairer and more rosy-hued than that which was past for ever.

Mrs. Forrest was the only addition to their party when they arrived again at the rectory. She could not be prevailed upon to witness the ceremony; but Theresa's earnest solicitations had won her consent to come to the breakfast, and they found her walking about the garden, in a very nervous and excited state indeed.

Nobody appeared in spirits during breakfast, except Sir James Singleton, who paid marked attention to his beautiful daughter-in-law, and did his best to sustain the frequently languishing conversation. Lawrence was observed to gaze constantly and in a strikingly thoughtful manner at his young, girlish bride, who always returned these glances with one of such fond, illimitable devotion, that everybody felt she had indeed embarked all her hopes in the frail

vessel of human love, and trembled to reflect upon what her fate must be, if this should ever sink beneath the cold, dark waters.

After due justice had been done to Mrs. Berrington's very handsome breakfast, and a sufficient number of toasts proposed and responded to, Theresa, with all the ladies of the party, retired to put on her travelling dress, and to receive her mother's last, passionately sorrowful embrace and blessing.

Then it was that her fortitude and self-possession entirely gave way, and that, in spite of all the brilliant and happy prospects opening before her, the pale bride lifted up her voice and wept as if her heart were breaking.

The dear, dear home, the loving friends, the thousand sweet associations of a joyous girlhood—all, all were to be relinquished now. The mournful "For ever" had been written in the book of destiny; and Theresa read nothing there, for the moment, but those bitter words.

But as summer does not cease to be summer on account of an occasional storm, so the sun did not cease to shine in Theresa's heart because of the heavy cloud that had for a brief space obscured its dazzling beams. And presently she raised her fair head from the fond, maternal bosom, and smiled her own gentle, happy smile on all who stood around.

The toilette was now hurried over, for the still weeping mother's sake ; and having received the tenderly affectionate adieux of the other three ladies, Theresa was turning to leave the room, when Caroline, taking up the splendid bouquet, which had been thrown carelessly on the bed, asked its owner if she did not intend to preserve it.

"Oh, no," replied the young wife ; "since Lawrence did not send it, I shall not trouble myself to carry it away. You keep it, if you like ; the flowers are pretty enough."

"I will, then," replied Caroline. "But who do you think was the giver?"

Before Theresa could reply, her husband's voice was heard bidding her hasten down; and, flying to obey his summons, the bouquet, and its donor, and Caroline Ashton, were all forgotten, for him who was henceforth to be the ruling and guiding star of her changed existence.

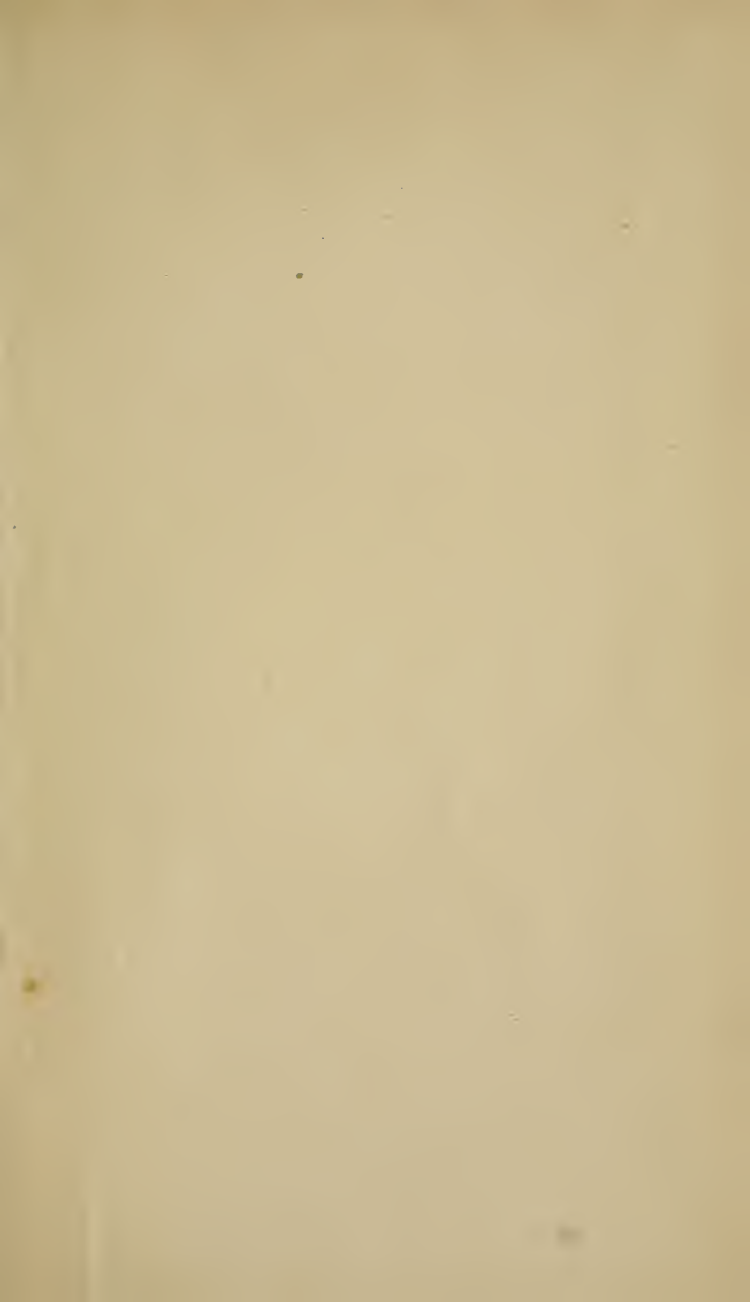
An elegant travelling carriage—the gift of Sir James Singleton—stood waiting at the door, to convey the young couple to the English seaport, from whence they were to embark for Ostend; and in a few minutes the bride was lifted in,—the bridegroom followed,—the post boy touched the horses,—and, like a vision, it all disappeared, leaving the spectators gazing at each other, and mutely inquiring whether their darling was indeed gone for ever from amongst them.

Mrs. Forrest, though earnestly entreated to spend the remainder of the day at the rectory, was too much upset by the exertion she had made, to endure any further excitement, and Caroline insisted upon accompanying her home.

They walked down the green, budding lane, side by side, in uninterrupted silence. They had both of them much food for thought,—both of them many sad and serious reflections to engross their minds. The bright sunshine that streamed along the path they trod, did nothing towards removing the gloom that filled both their hearts; and it was with weary, joyless steps that passing through the little garden, they entered (by the open glass doors) the pretty summer room, associated with so many recollections of their lost Theresa; and then, by a mutual impulse, started back, with exclamations of surprise and terror—

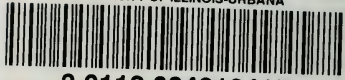
For there sat Philip Maranham !

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